

# Forever

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# Siaynoqsbride

Star Wars

Complete



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**Forever**

**Siaynoqsbride**

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## Summary

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### Description:

VaderPadmé AU. Padmé has been imprisoned by Sidious for ten years, and is awakened to be tortured to reveal all she knows about Vader's offspring, unbeknownst to him. NOW COMPLETE! Chapters being reuploaded.

# Chapter 1

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## Chapter One

*She was trapped in a labyrinth of corridors that twisted madly before her eyes, weirdly spinning in and out of focus. There was gray, untarnished metal all around her, and she could see nothing, feel nothing but a vast, searing emptiness. She heard faint, distant crying, and she knew it instantly, as if it was a part of her soul.*

*“Leia,” she whispered softly, hearing her own voice faintly, as if from a distance. She tried to walk forward, but found that her feet would not obey her commands, sticking obstinately to the ground despite all her efforts.. The crying intensified, and became almost painful to Padmé’s ears. She started to cry out in anger, her anxious pleas mingling with her daughter’s, becoming one and the same. She took one halting step forward, breaking through whatever barrier had been there before.*

*She walked faster and faster until she was running with fear and desperation, her feet pounding against durasteel as she raced urgently to her daughter. Suddenly, the crying shifted to another direction, disorienting her for a moment. She turned, not hesitating for a second, and began to run in the direction she heard the cries of her infant daughter. The crying reached an escalation, forcing tears to run down Padmé’s cheeks, and then it suddenly stopped, leaving nothing except the desolation she felt.*

*She spun wildly, seeing only more generic, soulless metal around her. There was nothing to mark her passage, nothing to show what direction she had come from, no marks of time or distance here.*

*“Leia!” She shrieked, her voice suddenly loud and piercing. She knew it was futile to call to call someone that could not respond, but she had to, had to try...*

*“Leia!”*

*Then there was sudden, ominous breathing behind her; a mechanical noise, threatening. It filled her with sudden fear, and she did not know why. She turned around slowly with dread, not knowing what new nightmare had come.*

*The dark face of an inhuman demon stood before her, clad in dark armor and a flowing, ebony cloak that seemed to blend in with the shadows. It rose out of the mist in her mind, a thing from hell. She wanted to scream at this new menace, wanted to demand her daughter back, but she did not have the strength. It was something she had never seen before, but yet it was the face of her nightmares.*

*“Where is my daughter?” she demanded harshly.*

*“Our daughter,” the figure corrected in a deep, threatening voice that did nothing to assuage her fears.*

*The thought that this abomination would dare to call itself Anakin Skywalker tore at her mind, raking across her subconscious. Agony tore at her in a way that no physical wounds*

*could, in a way that she could not have imagined before. But then she remembered, remembered all of it, going to Mustafar, seeing dark hate in him, feeling hands around her throat...*

*"No," she hissed, backing away wildly. But there was nothing, nowhere for her to hide. There was only pain, deeper and darker pain that escalated from inside her...*

*The thing that dared to pretend it once had been her husband folded its arms across its chest.*

*"She is mine now. She will be by my side and will rule the galaxy with me... forever," it said impassively, no inflections of emotion present. Padmé stepped back, horrified that this was what her husband had come to, that this monster was him, no longer able to deny it...*

*She wanted to tell the atrocity of a man that it could take her, that she would exchange her life for that of her daughter's. But she could not speak as she suddenly felt invisible fingers clamping her throat shut, snuffing her life out as they once had tried to before...*

Padmé woke suddenly, gasping the air which had been denied to her just seconds earlier. It took a moment for her to distinguish from her dream and reality, for everything was just as dark and despairing.

A table. She was lying on a metal table, one that felt cold on her back through the prisoner's uniform she was wearing. She tried to move and found that binders held her securely in a tight embrace. She decided not to struggle and save her strength, although she did not know what she was saving it for.

She closed her eyes and tried desperately to remember how she had got here. A sense of panic pervaded her consciousness, fogging her attempts to access her memory. The dream was already fading, and along with it, a sense of what had happened.

At last she remembered, piercing through the fog with sudden clarity that she began to wish she had not...

She was traveling to Mustafar, Obi-Wan's lies echoing clearly in her ears... She was running out of the ship into Anakin's arms, wanting to drown herself in his embrace, forget Obi-Wan's lies... He stood there, ripping her world in two as he spoke of his new empire... Obi-Wan stood at the top of the ramp, sealing her fate with his presence... There were once again fingers, clamping around her throat, and all she could see was Anakin's blue eyes blazing with hate and betrayal... She was in the medical bay, giving birth to twins, her vision fading slowly, darkness descending on her... There is still good in him...

And then there was only darkness, an overpowering sense of nothingness. She stirred, trying desperately to discern what else had happened, but there was nothing past that last memory. Anakin stood before her once more, and she closed her eyes as they flooded with tears.

A door opened, flooding her world with sudden light. She whimpered as it pierced her eyes, blinding her for a moment. But it was not half as bad as what came next, for she felt a despair that crept up her spine before settling in her mind, probing at her memories and emotions, invading her. No, she thought. Somewhere deep inside herself, she knew that she had to keep the memories of her children safe, away from the fingers that wanted the

knowledge, grasping and groping for it. No, she told the forces that probed her mind. That is mine.

She saw a figure enshrouded in shadow come to stand by her, moving in an odd, shuffling rhythm. It took her a few, heart-stopping seconds to figure out what it was, but then she knew.

It was the figure of the man that subverted her to start the Vote of No Confidence, inadvertently giving all the power in the Senate to a man who would wield it to become a tyrant. It was the figure that manipulated her husband away from her, that took her Anakin, her *love*, and made him into something far darker. It was the figure that manipulated countless senators into cheering for their ultimate demise and the death of liberty.

“Palpatine,” she whispered, calling him by his name, not by his station. She would never call him ‘Emperor’ as long as she lived.

She felt him grin with perverse pleasure, and shuddered.

“Padmé,” he hissed, leaning close to her ear as she squirmed away from him. “I was hoping you would wake. You have much to tell me.”

“Where is Anakin?” she quested softly, not knowing why she asked, not knowing why she wanted him to come save her after he could not save himself...

“Lord Vader is quite far from here, far away so he cannot... interfere.”

She groaned and turned her head away, noticing the immediate stiffness in her neck. Her worst nightmares had come true, and fear entered her again.

“But you... you will provide me with the location of the other Skywalker, the child.” Padmé knew then what the purpose of all this was, why she had been brought here and what she had to resist, why. Somewhere, where she couldn’t remember, there was the knowledge of where her son and daughter were. She did not speak her defiance, but she knew the darkness felt her resolve, felt it in the way her body tensed and then relaxed, coming to a new resolution.

“You will give in eventually,” the shadow mused softly, leaning back from her. “You cannot stand against me, Padmé. You will obey me or die.”

Padmé then called out to the one man she had once loved, reaching out to him in her despair with senses that stretched beyond herself. She knew he would save her if there was any trace of Anakin Skywalker left within him. She did not know if she could reach him, or if he would even come to her, if he had buried the man he loved the day he tried kill her. When there was no response, no love rising out of the depths, she knew then that she was alone, and that all she had were the meager defenses of her own mind

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Far away, on a distant starship, Lord Vader was supervising the hunt for a Jedi. He and his master had felt a disturbance in the force that could only mean one thing. They hovered over Tatooine, waiting for the signal to proceed from his Master.

Suddenly, he was blown away immediately by a presence that he had not felt in the Force for almost ten years. He was, for a second, no longer the most hated and feared man in the galaxy, but a man who was once a husband and a brother, the man who was once Anakin Skywalker. The Force came ablaze, flooding him with light that he shrunk away from, not



wanting to touch it. He rocked back on his heels, stunned by the mere thought that she could be alive. It took him a little bit before he could come back to reality, before he realized where he was. It took him even longer to grasp words, to think enough to block out the connection that was too powerful for him.

It is not possible, his mind whispered. The scene from long ago when his Master had told him the bitter truth flashed before his eyes, and he was submerged, drowning in pain once again. She is dead, his mind stated bluntly. Time had not dulled the ache, the overwhelming sense of acid shock and hatred.

He came back to reality, full force, to realize that his men were all staring at him, waiting for something. He wondered dazedly what it was.

“My Lord?” the captain asked. Vader forced his mind to come back, piece by agonizing piece, to the present, to his life.

He turned his helmeted head towards the man, knowing full well the effect he had on his underlings. He allowed his presence to come over the man, instilling a sense of dark fear in him. Vader did not feel merciful at that moment.

“I... should we send out an storm trooper group, My Lord?”

Vader knew that he would have to go with them, for the Jedi were clever and good at escaping. But right now, he could not deal with anything, could not bear the task of the hunt that went on when there was a Jedi to deal with.

“No. We will remain here longer and await my master’s orders.” With that, he swept off the bridge, his emotions swirling beneath the surface dangerously. His only thoughts were of the woman he loved and her death at his hands almost ten years ago; dangerous thoughts that threatened to unleash themselves upon him.

He knew he was not prepared.

## Chapter 2

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A/N— Thanks for all the reviews! I will try to update this daily, but that may or may not happen. We will see.

### Chapter Two

Lord Vader leaned back inside his personal quarters. He was not awaiting orders or doing anything else productive, or so it seemed. He was remembering. All the memories that came at her presence flooded through his head in a tide that had been repressed for a long time, shoved back until they could no longer harass him. But now, they were here, and he was powerless against the strength of his own thoughts.

*She leaned back against him, relaxing quietly for a moment. They never got enough time together, due to obligations neither could get out of. It made the times when they could be together all the more precious. It was all Anakin thought about when he was away.*

*He smelled in the scent of her hair, which always smelled of gentle tranquility to him.*

Vader closed his eyes and pretended, just for a moment, that he could feel still, and imagined her hair against his face, soft and lightly scented of Naboo flowers.

*His hand slowly trailed the length of her side to rest on her stomach, where he knew grew the daughter they wanted. He closed his eyes, then not a Jedi Knight or anything else, simply a soon-to-be father and husband. He drank in the peace of the moment, basking in the light of the setting sun on Coruscant. He reached out to her with both his mind and his arms, sheltering her. Everything was at peace then.*

*“Anakin,” Padmé whispered, disrupting his moment of peace. He brushed a strand of hair behind her ear before gently cupping her face in the palm of his hand.*

*He did not want to meet her glance right away, for he knew it would bring trouble. She wanted to talk about the future, when he wanted to relish in the moment. He could not avoid her any longer, and so turned his gaze to her.*

*“Anakin,” she whispered, her eyes almost overflowing with tears, “What are we going to do? We have to face this.”*

*He turned away, not wanting to answer her question.*

*“Padmé,” he murmured gently. ‘It doesn’t matter. You are here with me, and as long as you are here, I don’t need anything else. All I need is you, and the baby. That’s all I want. The galaxy can save itself,’ he said in a moment of selfish rebellion. She was taken aback.”*

*“Anakin, please. I remember the little boy on Tatooine, who looked towards the stars at night. I know how much being a Jedi means to you, and you know how much you matter to me. You are a hero, love.”*

A single tear rolled down Vader’s cheek. I have failed, beloved. Not only have I failed you, but my mother. I have failed myself and everyone I ever cared about. I am no hero. I never

was. All I wanted was you. I would have left the Jedi in an instant if it could have saved you.

*He tried to take her into his arms again, but she resisted, wanting instead to talk.*

*“No, Anakin! What are we going to do?”*

*He finally decided to face her, turning his full concentration to the issues she presented.*

*“We do not have much time together, love. Why do you insist on worrying? Everything will turn out fine.” He reached down to caress her extended belly, closing his eyes in a perfect dream. “I will be able to raise my children with you, and we will grow very old together, until the last of our days. We will be a family, Padmé.”*

*Her brow furrowed once and then she relaxed, although there was still a preoccupied look in her eye. Anakin massaged her shoulders gently, feeling the tension that had accumulated in the months he had been away.*

*He whispered to her, “Don’t worry. Everything will be alright, in the end. Trust me. I will protect you.”*

For a moment, Vader was standing strapped to the table, learning for the first time that it was he who caused the death of the one person he had sworn to always protect. His anguished yell echoed again... and again. He leaned against the wall, reliving that moment of pure anguish.

That was why he was so stunned by the fact that she could be alive. He had spent a decade of feeling nothing but self-loathing and hatred. If she was alive...

Nothing would change. He would still be the Sith that tried to kill her, tried to seal off her lying words by crushing her throat. He knew that there would be no forgiveness, ever.

Yet he had to try, had to go to her wherever she was, if she was alive. Nothing he ever did would redeem the wrongs, nothing would erase the permanent stain from his soul, but he had to save her. He had felt deeply seated terror in her. Anger boiled within him, setting his soul alight. Whoever tried to harm her would pay, and pay in blood.

## Chapter 3

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**A/N**— Here is the next chapter as promised! It's a little shorter, but oh well.

### Chapter Three

Padmé was dimly aware of the convulsions the needles sent her body into, her limbs wanting to flay madly and being kept bound tightly, her head hitting the metal hard, but not hard enough for her to black out. She could feel the war as her body raged against the drugs implanted in her system, drugs sent to take what the shadow was having difficulty getting. She could feel the pain from every screaming nerve as needles pierced her skin over and over again, filling her system with drugs designed to penetrate her mind.

But she could not allow herself the luxury of becoming distracted from the secrets she did not know away from the man who would use them to destroy her children. She did not focus on the pain, because she could not. Her body screamed for her to focus full her full attention on it, but she did not. Instead, she kept a constant vigil against the shadow, always keeping it away from her center.

It had already penetrated several layers of her mind, breaking into her memories of private moments and looking through them after discarding them to dig deeper. The shadow was immensely strong and powerful, and she could feel it pressing against her, fighting her at every turn. She could not let her guard down for even one instant.

*Give in*, it whispered in her head. *Give in to me, and I will leave you in peace. Let me see behind these barriers; you know it is useless to fight me.*

She ignored it as best she could and concentrated on weaving a thicker defense around her unconscious mind, wreathing it with memories of everything she knew of the Jedi. She had stood in the shadows, observing Anakin meditating, and he had taught her a few things. She clung to them desperately, knowing they were the only things that could save her.

*Ahh*, the shadow whispered. *You want to know about Anakin, then.*

Instantly, she began seeing the man she recognized to be her husband. She saw Jedi younglings, innocents. A blond-haired boy asked, tears filling his eyes, “Master Skywalker, there are too many of them. What are we going to do?” Padmé saw him ignite his lightsaber with a grim look on his face, raising it. No, she thought, searching for a way that this could not be possible. No. Not my Anakin. When he cut down the first child, she screamed, not only in her mind, but in reality, her anguish reverberating around the large room, echoing in her ears shrilly.

*No more*, she begged the shadow. *I cannot bear it.* She felt the shadow's triumph and amusement then. It tasted like ash in her mouth.

*Then relinquish your defenses.* Padmé knew that if she did so, she would be dooming her children to the life of her husband. She felt a brief pang of hurt, stunning in its intensity, but then shoved it behind the defenses that she had set up.

The shadow knew her defiance. She felt its frustration, and prepared herself for an onslaught. She screamed again as it showed her more of Anakin's sins...

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Lord Vader staggered under a new assault of blinding pain and mental agony. He was on the bridge of the Star Destroyer, and so all his men saw his moment of temporary weakness. None of them moved to help him; they were all too stunned that the immovable Vader had shown even a temporary sign of vulnerability.

But in the world that Vader was seeing, there was nothing but her face, twisted in a shape of agony even more powerful than when he had seen her in dreams. He saw her writhe and scream, held by restraints that kept her from harming herself. Not only did he see her, he felt everything she felt; her sense of betrayal and panic, the feeling of being alone and conquered.

He did not realize that he was going to speak until the word erupted from his lips, far louder and more powerful than he would have intended it to be. If he still could speak with a normal voice, the sound would have been raw, but instead it was mechanical, mocking him even as he screamed her name in pain.

All the officers on the bridge cowered in obvious fear and wonder, in awe that their commander had shown such an obvious display of emotion, in fear that he would kill them for witnessing it.

Vader regained himself enough to know that he had to go, had to go to her, had to save her. Her torment was his, and suddenly the fact that he would be in direct disobedience to his master if he left did not seem to matter.

"Commander," he hissed. The man came before him, trembling, too afraid to say a word.

"Stay in orbit around Tatooine. I am leaving on a mission, and will communicate with you from where I am."

As an afterthought, he added, "Search all ships leaving the planet."

He strode down the floor, his thoughts racing ahead of his actions, towards the smaller, discreet ship he would use to search. He would find her; he could only pray that it was before it became too late.

## Chapter 4

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A/N— I am out of town for the weekend, so this will not be updated until Monday. Enjoy this chapter!

### Chapter Four

He left her after a period of time. She had no way to mark hours or minutes, but it felt like days of pain. He had weakened her body, but that was no matter. She could survive that. Instead, he had dealt her a far more powerful blow. There was no way for her to close out the visions of Anakin slaughtering children and innocents.

Her restraints snapped open, no longer needing to keep her securely held in the convulsions the drugs caused. She toppled to the floor, her body not obeying the commands of her mind. There was no thought of escaping, for she could not even stand.

She knew that she could not let her guard down even for a second. Although his physical presence had left the room, she knew he was still there, and that even a temporary weakness could let him through into her mind.

She closed her eyes, probing her body for wounds. Every movement sent her into spiraling agony, so she moved as little as possible. There was nothing broken, but the pain was carefully honed and not blunt. It felt like a thousand searing needles, pressing all over into her flesh, burning her.

She slowly curled up into a ball, holding her knees tightly against her face, breathing harsher and raggedly by the moment. She felt like a child again, wanting to be held and comforted, told that everything was alright.

But there was no one to tell her that, no one to be her protector. The man who had always been her refuge, her strength, her Jedi knight, was gone. She clenched her fists, ignoring the pain, trying to hold back the agony that would accompany thoughts of the man she loved.

A tear slipped slowly down her cheek, burning against her pale flesh. She wanted to howl in despair, but knew that would do nothing. Another tear came out of her other eye, despite all her attempts to stop it from coming. Before she knew it, she was weeping, struggling to deal with the utter betrayal of the one person who had mattered more than anything.

All her pent-up sorrow washed over her, threatening to drown her. She saw him again, his eyes an unnatural shade of yellow, an expression of pure rage on his face. She saw him cut down an innocent child who stared up at him with naive trust.

She whispered his name into the darkness, cursing herself as she did. He was lost to her. The man who had been Anakin Skywalker would never have raised his hand to do anything but strike down evil and bring peace. He was gone, as Obi-Wan had told her. She combated her despair as she whispered a farewell to her husband, to his memory. She stopped weeping, although none of her pain lessened. All she had now was her strength, which was quickly

fading in the throes of betrayal. She felt it, and prayed for death in the dark, if only to keep her children safe.

---

Vader closed his eyes, reaching out with the Force, looking for her distinct pattern, almost afraid to find it again. He grasped onto her signature in the force, feeling it fading slowly. He clung to it, sensing out where she was. He opened his eyes, feeling only urgency.

“Coruscant,” he said aloud with some surprise. “She is on Coruscant.” Vader felt anger begin to lick at him, and he clenched his fist. He did not want his master to know that she was alive. There was constant treachery between a Sith Master and Apprentice, and he never knew when he could be betrayed. There was always extreme deference, but beneath it currents of plotting. It would be difficult to hide his presence from his Master.

He felt despair sink in his heart, and knew immediately that it was not his emotions, not his pain. She was quickly fading, and he had to make his movements soon.

He quickly set in the coordinates for a jump to hyperspace, then attempted to reach out to Padmé, whispering to her, *It will be alright, Love.*

---

Padmé raised her head out of the darkness, feeling a whisper on the back of her neck. She felt a presence around her. It murmured words of comfort in her ear, even as she felt that it was dark and evil.

She closed her eyes, knowing what it was.

“Anakin,” she whispered. She did not know what to think, whether to push him away and hate him for all he had done or to feel utter relief that he was there. She did neither, and simply sat, her tears dried.

Any thoughts she might have had were erased, for two imperials dressed in the red of the Emperor’s personal servants came through the door, and she knew that all her focus had to be towards keeping the part of her mind that knew where her children were protected.

## Chapter 5

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**A/N**— I'm back! Enjoy this chapter, and much thanks to all who reviewed.

### Chapter Five

Padmé felt her arms being lifted and being bound once again to the table. A sense of sickening dread washed over her, and she fought down the bile that came to her throat. She closed her eyes, strengthening the weak barriers that enclosed her subconscious memory. She drove all thoughts of Anakin from her mind, knowing they could only destroy her.

She felt the shadow come over her, its black presence invade her mind, sweeping easily into all but the most protected region. Her body convulsed once again, her mind screaming at the new pain that seemed to be greater than ever before.

The shadow felt her despair and moved ever closer like a leech to a wound. Padmé strengthened the foundations of the shields, remembering everything that her husband had stood for, and how she had stood with him in the golden light of love.

You will not take me, she said to the shadow. She felt it hiss at her and move closer, a constant barrage of images permeating her mind. She tried not to be hurt by them, tried not to see them, but there was nothing she could do about it. Slowly, she felt her shields being stripped by the pain the images wrought.

She felt panic start to close in around her, seizing her heart in its cruel grip. Never, she shouted to the shadow in desperate denial. I will never give in. You will never have my child!

The shadow hissed at her, breaking down the foundations that kept her mind intact. She fought against it, railing curses at it and pounding it with every memory of goodness she knew. None of it availed in the blackness of the shadow's seemingly limitless strength, and it only cackled at her as it moved further into her mind until it was at her last defense, the strongest place in her heart.

There she had placed all her most intimate memories of Anakin, of the way he moved, the way he smiled, her love for him that encompassed her heart. She clung to the memories, holding them like a shield against the shadow. She poured the memory of her children into the shield and the brief seconds she had with them, the way she was their mother and determined to sacrifice her life, if necessary, to protect them. She felt the shadow retreat slightly, and she held the small victory with a renewed feeling of hope.

But she was wrong; the shadow had not retreated. She was suddenly torn away from her mind by a pain that encompassed everything she had experienced before, her body erupting in agony. In that sudden weakness, the shadow attacked, and she realized that there was no hope, that she had been foolish to think that she could stand against the might of the shadow, for it was more powerful than she ever dreamed.

It hurtled visions at her of her son as a Sith, destroying everything he crossed. Her barriers broke down as she screamed in denial that it would never happen, that it could not, that it



would not be her that betrayed her offspring by the weakness of her mind. She saw her daughter kill, and there was nothing left... except one memory of hope, moments before, that he would rescue her, save her from this monster.

The shadow sneered at her and destroyed her world with four words; I have foreseen it.

She screamed in denial and agony as it swept into her mind, taking everything that was there easily. Even as the shadow saw all of her thoughts, she could not witness what her mind had hidden from her, so she did not even know what was hidden in her subconscious.

She felt from the shadow supreme triumph that destroyed her utterly, knowing that she had failed. But then, she felt a hint, just a small glimmering of something like... disappointment coming from the shadow. She tried to probe deeper into the murky depths of the shadow, but it sent her reeling back into her own mind.

Padmé came back to consciousness, her body no longer writhing in agony, her mind no longer invaded. She felt the shadow withdraw, and heard it utter an order to its underlings.

“Kill her.”

---

Vader landed his ship on the platform of the building, not caring about having a clean landing. It screeched as it landed, scraping the underbelly of the vessel, digging into the duracrete. His thoughts were racing in desperation, screaming to get to her before it was too late. He had felt the power of her despair and her final resignation and submission, and knew that she would die if he did not come soon.

A locked door stood in his way, and he snarled with fury and desperation, using the Force to open it. He charged down metal corridors, feeling her presence fading.

He recognized the Emperor's elite guards, and struck them down with his red lightsaber flashing, giving no thought to their deaths. Blood pounded in his ears as he ran, not stopping for anything. His pitch-black cloak whirled around him as he ran, and the mere sight of him was enough to terrify anything that crossed his path into submission.

He did not know how long he ran, feeling her presence in the labyrinth of twisting hallways, a constant guide and beckon to him. He opened countless doors and slashed countless security devices, feeling only her fading presence. He yelled in fury that it was taking so long to get to her, the harsh sound echoing for a long time.

At last, after what seemed like hours, he came to the door in which she was. He frowned against the lock, having to concentrate fully on opening it. The door had sealed Force locks, requiring all his power to open it.

He came in the door to see two red-suited Imperial guards raising their weapons at a curled figure on the floor he took to be his wife. With a yell of fury, he killed them with his lightsaber, slashing their throats easily. When he was done, he turned to the prone bundle on the floor he knew to be the woman he loved. She looked up, and though he wore the mask, he could feel her brown eyes piercing his. He whispered to himself, not daring to utter her name aloud.

Padmé, he thought tremulously. Padmé.

## Chapter 6

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A/N— Sorry about the cliffhanger in the last chapter. Oh well. Enjoy this one, and thanks to everyone who reviewed!

### Chapter Six

He stared transfixed at his angel, the woman that had haunted his dreams and then his nightmares. He could not believe that she was alive, in the flesh; half of him had been expecting everything to be a clever ruse, and that his panic would be for nothing.

Chocolate hair fell across her face, and she looked up at him, her eyes boring into his. Tears pricked at his the corners of his eyes and rolled down his cheeks as he stood, unable to move, unable to think.

Without any thought, he reached out a black glove, not even daring to think that he was worthy to touch her, still wanting to try. His cybernetic hand snaked forwards of its own accord, timidly and gently. It was odd to think that the hand of a murderer could be gentle.

One of her hands slowly reached towards his, closing the gap between them. He looked to her face and saw tear-streaks of pain and despair on it, marks that he knew too well. His attention was drawn to her slowly-moving hand, which came closer and closer to his, until tears were streaming down his face, burning against his skin like fire. The thought that he would be able to touch her, even to grasp her hand, was almost too much.

“Anakin,” she breathed, looking up at him once. Somehow, Vader did not have the strength to correct her, to tell her that was not the name of the man who stood before her. Anakin was the one who loved her, who protected her. Let her think that he was Anakin for now.

Just when her hand was almost on his, their fingertips almost touching at the tips, she withdrew her hand. He did not know why for a few seconds until he looked over to her, and saw her eyes roll up and drop in a dead faint. He did not know whether it was out of dread or pain.

He simply gazed at her for a few moments, content to look on her even through the hideous parody of the world that he saw. His lips parted beneath the mask and he closed his eyes, feeling her presence through the Force, luminous and tender.

He heard distantly the footsteps of more guards, coming to see what the disturbance was. He grunted and reached towards her, carefully and gently, as if she was porcelain and would break. He slowly lifted her into his arms, noting that she stirred in pain. His blood boiled at the thought of what she must have gone through to accumulate the wounds.

He wished, not for the first time, that he could change how his voice always boomed out with rapt authority. Just once, he wished he could whisper to her and tell her that everything would be alright, that she was safe and he would find whoever did this to her. A bitter smile curved his lips as he remembered another time when he had made the same rash promise.

He walked through the shifting corridors, carefully not jostling her, tenderly not sparing any care for her. He used skills of stealth he had not needed in a long time; when would he need not to be seen?

Finally, after what seemed like hours, he came to the door that lead out of the building, noting the footsteps behind him. He entered the ship and strode to the medical bay in the back, setting her down on the bed. He paused at the door, wanting to tell her some sort of assurance, but he knew that nothing would sound right. He swallowed a hard lump in his throat; nothing Anakin said could be said by Vader. He wanted to touch her, to reach out and stroke her cheek, but how could she possibly take that as a sign of comfort?

Instead, he pulled himself away from the small room with effort and walked to the controls of the vessel, where he set in coordinates for Vijun and Bast Castle. It was a place where he felt safe, and where they could rest undisturbed. He closed his eyes and prepared to meditate, ready to wake the moment she became conscious.

---

Padmé was enclosed deep in the cocoon of sleep, her mind simply content to rest and not produce any twisted dreams. It was easier for her to remain asleep, because on awakening she would be plunged into pain.

Her rise to awakening was slow and bleary. The first thing she saw was a black ceiling reflecting dimly at her. She blinked, noting that her body ached all over, the slow throb of a wound that was not yet healed. She groaned, wondering where she was, feeling the lightly padded bed that she was on.

Memory spun back to her, coursing over her like a wave.

*She had prepared herself for death, tilting her head back and waiting for the one, short blast that would seal her fate. It never came somehow, and she looked up to find the dark demon from her nightmares stood there, its red weapon glowing like hellfire.*

*Thoughts rushed through her head; was it here to kill her or save her? She looked into the dark pools that served it for eyes, searching for a sign of humanity.*

*Her sign came. A black glove extended out, timidly and shaking. She stared at it uncomprehending for a few seconds, but then decided to take the chance of escape.*

*She reached out a hand that seemed white, almost pale compared to the darkness of the glove. She thought she saw him tremble, and a slight sound escaped the mask. In that moment, in a flash of illumination, she knew. Anakin, the man she had loved, the man who had destroyed children, was there, offering her his hand. He was her salvation and her curse.*

*Tears in her eyes, she whispered his name, the name of the man she knew he was beneath the facade of black armor.*

She mouthed his name in the depths of the small imperial ship, remembering that second of infinite pain and hope.

*She reached out to him, wanting to touch him, wanting to shrink away in horror at the same time. Her fingertips were almost on his, white and black almost touching for a split second before the black closed in on her eyes and took her.*

Padmé was vaguely surprised to touch her cheek and find damp salty tears on it. She hesitated, holding her breath, knowing that he was out there, and all it would take would be a few steps to go to him. She grimaced, knowing that a few steps could be too much.

She thought of what she had seen of him; the mask and the armor. She knew nothing of the events that had passed at Mustafar; Obi-Wan had told her nothing. She closed her eyes, somehow knowing that the armor did not conceal the man she had seen last. *Is this the price you paid, Anakin?*

She was tempted to call for him, but resisted that urge, suddenly being afraid of him and angry at him at the same time. She laid back, content to wait for him. She did not know whether she would scream at him or fall into his arms; only time would tell. Perhaps she would do both.

## Chapter 7

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### Chapter Seven

She was aware of him before he came into the room where she was. She closed her eyes, sensing his presence. It had grown darker over the years, twisted until there was only a gleam of the man she once had known as Anakin Skywalker.

She felt his eyes on her, and turned to look at him.

The thing that served for him as a face was elemental and terrifying; a demon's cold, unyielding sharp features. He was taller than she remembered, towering over her. An ebony cloak swept behind him, shrouding him in mystery and evil. He wore armor to keep the rest of the world out, but she could only see it as enclosing himself. His breathing was a constant noise in the background that betrayed any sort of humanness.

Her voice was harsh when she used it, rasping out in a way that she had not expected it to.

"Where are you taking me?"

She felt his gaze slip down from her face.

"To Bast Castle on Vjun. It is my home, and you will be safe there."

A bitter, sarcastic smile crossed her face.

"Do you even know what you're protecting me from?"

She felt his eyes move back to her in a penetrating way. It reminded her uncannily of his master, and she let out a soft whimper. Of course, she thought bitterly. He is Palpatine's apprentice. He folded his arms across his black-plated chest.

"Perhaps you could enlighten me."

His voice was cold, and it took her a moment to recognize the same inflections of anger she had observed in Anakin. He wants to protect me, she mused. She was tempted to laugh out loud at the idea.

"The Emperor," she whispered, staring him straight into what she hoped was his eyes. "Your master did this to me."

"What?" she heard him hiss. A shockwave of denial and rage burst across the room.

Somehow, she did not feel any sympathy for him. All that had been wiped away by a crimson lightsaber. When she had whispered his name before... that had been only a temporary sign of weakness. She could not love this man, not after what he had done.

"Do you want me to tell you what he did to me?" She asked him the question with a straight face, not allowing any emotion to show through.

She thought she saw him tremble for a moment, but it was soon gone.

"I..." his voice trailed off weakly.

She persisted on.

"The drugs and the needles were bad enough, but that wasn't what almost killed me."

She weakly stood, pulling herself up and wincing with pain, determined to face him as an equal.

"He showed me," she snarled, "you." Although she stood several inches shorter than him, there was the distinct picture of her standing over Vader, overpowering and weakening him.

For once, the Dark Lord seemed not to have anything to say. He simply stood, a mute, watching her rave at him.

"He showed me you killing children, Anakin," she hissed, her voice growing in loudness and intensity. "Children. He showed me *everything* you have done."

He spoke.

"My name is Vader."

She turned away from him, carefully easing herself onto the bed.

"I have nothing to say to Vader or Anakin at the moment, whoever you may be."

For a moment, she felt anger come over her, followed by a harsh recoil of guilt tempered by sorrow. She ignored it as best she could, knowing that it came from the monster that stood behind her. For a long moment, they simply stayed that way, her with her back turned to the second-most feared man in the galaxy, he gazing after her. Finally, she heard heavy footsteps echoing down the hallway, leaving her in peace.

She struggled to breathe as a tear slipped down her cheek, glimmering in the cold lighting.

"Was I wrong?" She addressed the question to the empty room, talking to no one. "Was Obi-Wan right?" It hardly seemed to her that Anakin Skywalker could be encased in the abomination that had stood before her moments before, and suddenly, she felt lost, struggling for balance in a world that kept tilting.

---

Vader sighed harshly as he came to the cockpit of the small vessel. The meeting had not gone as he had hoped. He had wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, and how much he had been tormented ever since she left, how his only thoughts were of her. He had wanted to tell her how he had suffered for the last ten years, blaming himself for her death, clinging to his master because there was nothing else to cling to.

Instead, the worst possible thing had happened. She had wanted to confront him, and he saw what he most feared in her eyes. Condemnation.

His thoughts spun to what she had told him.

His master. Anger boiled within him, red-hot and intense. If his master had indeed been the one to hurt her... But what could he do? Vader swallowed as the truth of his situation sunk in.

He was weakened, no longer even half of the man he had been. There was no self-pity in his thoughts, only a blunt truth. He could not possibly fight his master and win.

Helplessness gnawed at him, an emotion that he had not felt in a long time, wrapped in the cloak of the Dark Side as he was. He wanted revenge, which was certain. He wanted to kill the Emperor more than he wanted to kill anyone. His anger against Obi-Wan, while still existing, suddenly seemed like a petty grudge compared with the rage he now felt against his master.

He thought no more as his ship came out of hyperspace to rest above Vijun. He was tempted to call back to Padmé and tell her that they had arrived, but he doubted she would welcome either his voice or the sight of where she would rest for an indefinite amount of time. He simply stared out at the broiling yellow clouds and waited.

---

Padmé limped out into the cockpit, leaning heavily on the walls for support. She sensed from Vader a desire to help, to reach out to her, but she ignored it. She sat down heavily in a black chair, feeling small and insignificant against the bulk of Vader.

A lone memory slipped into her head, and even as she tried to ignore it, she saw it in her mind.

*She stood on the edge of a high-peaked mountain. It was in the early hours of the morning, and she had left Anakin to come see.*

*The sun peered over the mountain-top, illuminating everything in a rosy-pink and orange glow. She could see the sweeping valley before her, with verdant, lush emerald trees and occasionally a bright crimson or gold. Mist swept around everything, clothing the valley below her with light dewdrops. She could see the crystal blue of the river that ran through the canyon, and could hear the distant roar of the waterfall that they had crossed.*

*The smell of Naboo's mountains filled her until she was a creature that belonged to the place, part of the balance. She heard the bird-song rise with a gentle tranquility and peace.*

*She stepped forward until she was at the edge, looking down directly. Joy filled her, radiating from the simple beauty contained in a sunrise, and she spread her arms wide, smiling and exhilarated.*

*She felt warm, muscular arms cross over her and the soft breathing of the man she knew to be her husband. She felt his respect and awe, and they stayed in their warm embrace for a time, simply enjoying the view and each other.*

*When she spoke, it was softly with reverence.*

*"I have been here dozens of times. My parents took me when I was very young, and I haven't tired of it yet."*

*She felt him smile, and his love filled her whole until she was at peace, perfectly content with everything.*

*"Nothing on Tatooine even comes close to this."*

*Her laughter echoed out, tinkling like a bell over the mist and the sunshine. She felt his amusement in the way his arms relaxed and the way he chuckled a little.*

*She closed her eyes and formed a picture in her mind.*

*“Ani, when the war is over and are able to start our family, I want to bring our children here.”*

*“Of course.”*

*They were silent a few moments more. She relaxed in his embrace, content to let him hold her, feeling utterly safe. It was him that broke the quiet.*

*“I still think that none of this compares to you.”*

*She turned around, staring straight up into his eyes. A mischievous thought came to her, and she tackled him, tickling him mercilessly.*

*“You are the charmer,” she gasped with laughter as he got revenge on her. He grinned, and suddenly she found herself on his lap, cradled in his arms.*

*She admired the line of his jaw as he stared out at the mountains with easy concentration. She reached up and captured his lips in a gentle, passionate kiss. He sighed with contentment when they came apart, stroking her cheek gently as he stared into her eyes.*

*“Whenever I am away, fighting,” he whispered in a moment of utter solemnity, “Whenever I miss you so much I think I cannot bear it, my mind will return here, and I will be here with you.”*

*Padmé’s eyes filled with tears as she thought of the brutal Clone Wars and how, after this brief rest, he would leave her again. She clung to him, determined to save the moment in her mind. She felt his arms rub her back as she buried her head in her shoulders.*

*After awhile, Anakin spoke again, and it was with a false sense of joviality.*

*“You’d better get up and get some breakfast,” he murmured, “Before I eat it all.” She opened her eyes and realized that she could indeed smell roasted shaak.*

*They got up, smiling and laughing again. He extended his hand to her, and she took it with a grin, allowing him to lead her back to their campsite.*

---

Padmé looked out into the world of Vijun. Yellow, acidic clouds boiled against a bleak backdrop of brown and grey. There was no plant life on the world that she could see. It was a barren, empty land. The ugly flat of the plains was only broken by a great, towering black giant building that encompassed the land.

She wondered if his choice of home reflected his soul, bleak and empty only broken by anger. There was something about this world that agreed with the man sitting beside her.

The ship pulled into a landing bay, coming to rest under a balcony. Vader stood up abruptly, startling her. He offered his hand in a way that eerily reminded her of a memory moments before. She ignored his offer, painfully limping to the exit of the ship. She saw him



stride ahead, and she caught a whiff of pain from him as well as pity. The door hissed open, deploying a ramp.

He walked calmly down the ramp, coming to the end of it and waiting patiently for her to make her slow, shuffling journey down to the ground.

He waved a hand at the forbidding castle and the huge, ebony door. She could not tell if it was sarcasm when he boomed out,

“Welcome home.”

## Chapter 8

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A/N— Sorry that this chapter is kind of short. The next one will be longer. Enjoy!

### Chapter Eight

The door opened by itself. She sneered at Vader, who had obviously used the Force to accomplish that. He stepped through first before waving a hand towards the castle. She stepped into the door, which was enormous, standing almost five meters tall.

A high-vaulted ceiling was plated in black and grey tile. It formed a kind of dome-shape, sloping down to the equally dismal floor, which was empty except for a few walkways. Stairs sloped up the sides at the back, and corridors lead off to different places.

She felt his eyes on her back. She did not turn, determined not to speak or look at him.

“What do you think?”

She shook her head, looking up at the giant ceiling, hearing the raindrops from the clouds she had seen earlier, pregnant with acidic water.

“I will show you to your room,” Vader said with what she was barely able to recognize as a hint of uncertainty in his voice. She nodded and waited for him to move, noting the fluid ease and grace with which he walked.

They passed by many rooms, some of which she was able to peer in to. Her blood chilled when she saw a circular room in which there were chains and other unspeakable torture devices.

They finally made it to her room. She doubted she would remember the way to and from it in the winding corridors. She opened the door, which was considerably heavy and thick.

The room was considerably plainer than most she had seen. There was a large window that looked out on the world, which had some ugly puce drapes pulled over, casting a purple hue over the room. There was some kind of stone on the floor with a rug on the floor that matched the drapes. The bed had a cover of the same sort of what she guessed to be fine silk. Closet doors were at one side of the room, opposing what she took to be a 'fresher door. It was a bland, ugly room, and she surveyed it with one sweep of her eyes, needing to do nothing else.

She sensed him waiting impatiently behind her for some sort of acknowledgement. She turned to him, her eyes as cold as ice.

“It is acceptable,” she said frigidly.

He gave a slight nod, but still did not leave. She suddenly felt tired, tired of having to deal with this man who was not her husband, tired of feeling despair, tired of the ugly room. She wanted to scream at him, to rip off his mask until she could see the face of Anakin, until she could look into his deep blue eyes. She did not want this demon that seemed barely even to be human.

“What now?” She asked the question in an even, flat voice, without any kind of emotion.

“I have matters to attend to,” he said. “We will meet later.”

He hesitated for a moment before striding away, powerful footsteps resounding off the walls.

She stood for awhile, standing in the doorway before going to and lean herself down on the ugly, soft bed. She laid there for a few moments, gazing up at the ceiling. With nothing to occupy her, her mind lead her along a dangerous path, twisting through a maze of things she could not afford to contemplate.

He is not Anakin, she thought to herself. Not the Anakin that I loved. He is something else, something hideous and strange. He is right, she thought, finally bitterly resigning herself to the truth. He is Vader.

She drifted to another subject, which was no less depressing. Palpatine knows, she thought with subdued horror. What will become of my children now? Her eyes fluttered shut as she whispered their names. Luke, she thought. Leia. I have betrayed you both. I am so sorry. She whispered a silent prayer, wishing for them to be safe, kept hidden from the Emperor.

My husband changed beyond recognition, my children doomed to their father’s fate, she agonized numbly. She did not weep; all her tears had already been spent. Instead, she crossed the room and opened the curtains, staring out dimly at the sky, noting that each raindrop hissed as it reached the ground, killing all hope of life.

## Chapter 9

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A/N— Much thanks to everyone who reviewed! It really brings a smile to my face and inspires me to keep writing (secondart to my muse, of course). Oh, and I know only a little about the world of Vijun and BAst Castel except for what I have gleaned from webpages, so if anyone has any suggstions or is terribly offended, please let me know in an e-mail.

### Chapter Nine

Vader paced the floor, an intense look of concentration on his face behind the mask. His cloak whirled around his black midnight form as he stalked; a predator unto prey. Or so it appeared.

He had just finished a transmission with one of his underlings, a man named Rehis. There was nothing new to report, he had said. Vader wondered if they were growing lax in his absence, and gave the man a taste of what would happen if the Dark Lord arrived to find that they had grown lazy.

Rehis had practically bent over backwards in order to show his obedience and thoroughness, up unto the point of transcribing all the records of the ships to Vader's home. Satisfied, Vader had cut the transmission, wondering about the lack of backbone and incompetence in Imperial troops.

His anger against his master had cooled, until he was able to see clearly. His anger against Sidious was not new; he had hated his master for a long time. But it was now more intense, even if he could still not see a way of toppling the Emperor off of the throne.

Since Padmé was back, all his desires for his own Empire had been reborn, stronger and more powerful. He closed his eyes, thinking of it. An Empire of theirs, forged together, would be strong and incorruptible, surpassing even what the Emperor had managed. And he would have revenge against the old man for all of his scheming.

And then, maybe, she could accept him; begin to love him again... His mind wandered, thinking about a shared future with her, days full of love, her completing the gap in his soul, renewing him and filling him as he once had been. He longed for her love, needed it. The ache had always been there; it had simply been intensified by her presence.

Vader brought himself firmly back to reality, to the world in which he inhabited, where everything was seen through a sharp, unreal parody of the world. She loathed him; that was certain.

He could see it in the way she glared at him, eyes filling with unspoken hatred and accusations. He could see it in the way she refused his touch, even to assist her in all her injuries. It burned him, making him almost tremble with emotion. Part of him knew he deserved it and more; part of him hated what he had become, and the fact that he was scheming once she was near him again made him feel disgust, even as his mind raced towards the future. He quickly repressed that part, knowing that it was a simple weakness and that such weaknesses were a rot that, if allowed to fester, could bring damnation on him.

Something would have to be done, he mused. Something that Anakin would have done, to reassure her, to comfort her fears. The analytical part of his mind was already coming up with solutions, presenting them one by one. The part of him that loved Padmé, that could not bear to live without her, already knew what it would be.

He stopped his pacing in mid-stride as he realized what he would do. It was perfect, and would assuage her pain, pain that he felt even now. He wanted her, loved her with everything that was in him. His love was almost painful in its intensity, love that had been rekindled by a simple breath of life. Her pain was a constant source of agony to him, and he wanted to take it away in any way he could, to rescue her, to save her in hopes that she might be able to save him. He walked away; down the corridors of the place that reflected his mind to find start his preparations.

---

Padmé heard a knock on her door, disrupting her from her quiet thinking as she stared out into the dim sky. She opened the dark wood to see a protocol droid, encased in simple silver. She thought of Threepio, and her heart ached.

She noticed that the droid was carrying a plate full of food, which she noted carried all her favorite dishes. She was tempted to send it back as a sign of rebelliousness, but she soon realized that she was far too hungry and weak to refuse a meal.

Before the droid could speak an unnecessary explanation, she took the food and limped over to her bed, where she set it down. She came back to the doorway and stared at the droid, hoping that it would understand to leave. She had no such luck.

“Good Evening, my lady. I am D-9HP, and have been instructed to serve as your personal servant. I have many useful functions, including...” The robot’s voice was a female voice, impassive and cool. She realized that it had not been programmed with any sort of personality like Threepio, and that it did not have any of the droid’s occasionally irritating but sometimes heartwarming personality.

She spoke aloud, interrupting the droid’s bland list of functions.

“He was not courageous enough to face me for dinner, I see.”

The droid stepped back a little. She pushed herself off of the wall, a gesture that would have been more convincing if it did not cause her to wince in pain.

The droid seemed to recover itself as it continued on.

“Lord Vader requests your presence in his quarters in two hours, my lady. I will be back to lead you there.”

The droid turned and clattered down the hallway in an effortless shifting of gears, making no noise as it passed. Padmé felt as if she was in a house of wraiths and shadows that twisted around her, mocking her and beguiling her at every turn.

She went and sat down on the bed, slowly picking up an odd-looking fruit and eating it, but her mind was far away, already anticipating what was to happen later that evening with a sense of inexorable dread.

## Chapter 10

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### Chapter Ten

Padmé exited the 'fresher door to find a gown on her bed. She looked around for her other clothes, not wanting to wear anything that would tie her to Vader, but they were gone. She sighed, knowing that the droid had come and taken them, like some kind of shadow or wraith. She picked up the dress and surveyed it with an impassive eye.

It was a deep sapphire color in some kind of heavy material that still seemed supple and easy to move in. Jewels adorned it in places, adding a delicate touch, glittering in the light. It was strapless and had fastenings in the form of silver clasps up the back. She glared at the dress, knowing that it was Vader that wanted to see her in it, Vader that picked it out for her. She would have gladly worn it for Anakin, but she wanted no part in looking beautiful for a monster.

She, however, had no choice.

---

Vader stepped back for a second, admiring his handiwork, and then stepping forward to make several adjustments. It was perfect, he thought with emotion once he was finished. It would show her his devotion, and the fact that he still loved her, that he had never stopped thinking about her, tormenting himself with her memory. It would explain to her all the things he could not say.

The droid that he had built, made to be impassive and mechanical, stepped up to him.

"I have left her the dress, Lord Vader."

Vader acknowledged the droid with a wave of his hand.

"Good. In an hour's time, lead her here."

The droid gave a little bow of its head, a metal servant, but Vader's thoughts were already traveling along a long road, drifting away towards her...

---

Padmé stared at her face in the mirror. Her eyes were sunken and dark, much more than she remembered them being. She appeared to herself to look much older than she should be, and she knew it was not because of the natural passage of time. She glanced into her own eyes, and was hardly surprised to see that they were infused with a look of despair. Her own emotions floated around her, almost tangible in their intensity.

She stepped back, surveying herself with a final nod. She would not even pretend to have attempted to make herself look beautiful for Vader. She would leave her hair down, brushed but inelegant. The gown showed a little more than she would have wished, being bound

tightly to her before sweeping into long, flowing skirts that swirled around her whenever she moved.

She walked over to the window, glancing out once at the malevolent environment, which had begun to darken, and closed the drapes, shutting herself in.

She felt a presence come over her, gently, softly. It was the same presence she had felt when she had been in the Emperor's clutches, the same presence that had comforted her. She felt its love and devotion, to the point that she wanted to seek it out, to fall into it, to drown herself in it. Her fist clenched as she resisted it, fought against it as vehemently as she had against the Emperor. It withdrew, leaving her exhausted and weary.

She heard the almost soundless mechanical noises of the droid she knew would bring her to Vader. Her gaze moved wearily over to settle on the silver-clad droid.

"My lady, Lord Vader requests your presence now. I will lead you to him."

They walked down countless hallways, walking past rooms she would not look in for fear of what she would find. She noticed with detachment that her walk was growing worse, and the pain had not abated. The place was huge, and occasionally she wondered what Vader had been thinking when he created such a palace for one man.

Finally, they came to a large, open, circular door. She could not see into it, and part of her did not want to. She drew on her inner strength, the core of energy which had allowed her to resist the Emperor for as long as she had, the part of her that had allowed her to face power-hungry Neomoidians when she was only fourteen.

She stepped into the chamber as the door opened, not knowing what to expect. The first thought that came to her was one that marveled at the chamber's largeness. It was huge, with dark stone that plated the whole room, and lights that were cast low, causing the whole room to look mysterious and shadowed.

The thing that she saw after that was enough to make her gasp, not in awe, but in rage. In the middle of the floor, there was a perfect simulation of the mountains that she and Anakin had visited so long ago. It flickered, allowing her to know that it was a simple illusion, but it was all too real to her, up to the same stones and plants that surrounded the area that to her had always represented peace. Standing calmly in the middle of all of it was Vader, the eerie lights reflecting off of his dark armor, the unmistakable noise of his breathing in the background.

---

He had heard her approach, the soft footfalls being unmistakable. She had blatantly shoved his presence back to him, rejecting him. He could have easily gone into her mind, claiming her for his, but he did not, retreating because he loved her, because something inside him had rebelled at the thought of entering her mind. Something had been repulsed at the idea enough to stop him even contemplating it.

He felt something deep in the pit of his stomach that he had not in a very long time... anticipation? Dread? Nervousness? He did not know, but did not have any more time to examine his emotions once she entered the room.

The first thing he noticed was the way the gown swept around her. It clung to her and hung off her, making her appear like an angel again, one of infinite grace, one that could save him in every way his subconscious wanted her to. He trembled as his gaze moved up her body until he was staring into her eyes, which were dark with unexplained anger. He wondered what it was about, puzzled about her rage.

---

Padmé felt anger rise in her, taking her over. This abomination wanted to upturn her past, marring her memories of Anakin Skywalker, putting a stain on the things that were most precious to her deep within her heart.

“How dare you,” she heard herself hiss, a growing red flush spreading up her cheeks. Vader stood, looking as he always did, with no clues to what he was thinking or feeling. She stepped into the horrible parody of one of her best memories, which flickered a little bit as her foot hit it. Her anger and despair, which had been repressed until now, began to rise in her, threatening to come out finally.

“How *dare* you,” she shrieked, her fists coming up in a mindless gesture of anger, not knowing what she intended to do with them, not caring. Vader simply stood, no discernable emotions coming from him.

She beat against him, uttering curses and screaming, raking her fingernails down his mask, not doing any sort of damage to him. She felt darkness begin to come over her, but she paid it no attention, caught up in her anger as she was. Finally it claimed her, closing over her eyes before it took her into a place where there was no thought or emotion.

Vader caught her in his arms as she slumped down, her injuries finally claiming her consciousness. He noticed how frail she was, the way she seemed to be incredibly light in his arms, barely a burden. He gestured, and the false image of the mountains disappeared.

He knelt carefully to the ground, leaning her down in his arms, feeling tenderness come over him as he cared for her.

“I have neglected your health,” he said as he leaned over her.

Emotions that he had not felt in their full intensity for what seemed like forever swept over him, claiming him not as Vader, but as something else entirely. He was awash in love and light, and for once, the darkness did not have a hold on his soul.

His black-gloved hand moved forward, and as he saw the light softly illuminating her face, tenderly stroked her cheek with the back of his hand in a gesture that Anakin Skywalker would have attempted.

“I am sorry,” he whispered, and it could have been more than an apology for his failed attempt at comforting her. It could have been an apology for everything that he had done, an apology for becoming the thing that knelt over her, an apology for the lives he had taken.

Her eyes chose to flutter open at that moment, and he cursed himself in a thousand ways as the spell was broken, and he returned to being Vader.

“Let me go,” she said with surprising compassion in her voice. He complied, releasing her, his thoughts and feelings in turmoil.



Padmé stood carefully, her mind swirling madly. She had opened her eyes, half-expecting to see the face of her husband glancing softly down at her. Instead, it had been Vader in a cruel reality that had denied her once again, tricking her with a monster instead of her husband, empty space in her arms instead of her children.

“You need medical attention,” she distantly heard him say. She paid no attention to him, being as caught up in her thoughts as she was.

The next thing he said was the only possible thing that could have pierced through the fog in her mind and her heart. Her attention was drawn directly to him, everything else postponed as he asked

“What happened to our child?”

## Chapter 11

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### Chapter Eleven

Padmé froze as he uttered the words, her mind being yanked out of the fog down to cruel, harsh reality. Her shoulders stiffened, and she turned away from Vader hurriedly before he could see the look in her eyes.

"I cannot discuss this with you," she whispered raggedly. "Not now." Her mind spun wildly as she foresaw two choices, two paths. He could save their children, could get to them before the Emperor... but would she want him to? What would he do once he had his offspring in his hands? He was far more powerful than her, and she could not protect them from him...

She felt him come up behind her, and she felt an abrupt, irrational fear that he was going to touch her in a way that Anakin would have, with a hand on her shoulder or arms around her waist. He did not.

"I have a right to know," he said. "I am the father."

Now she turned to him, her eyes alight with sorrow and rage.

"You lost all *rights*," she hissed, "When you tried to choke the life out of me."

It was the first time she had spoken about Mustafar, and even as it felt liberating, it stung and burned. She found herself teetering on the brink of despair, scrabbling to hold on to herself as she relived the nightmare she had endured.

She sensed that her words had unsettled Vader, had somehow moved him. She collected her thoughts as he stood helplessly before her.

"Anakin Skywalker was the father," she whispered softly. "Not you. Never."

Her frantic thinking reached on a solution, which she was able to grasp and hold onto.

"But," she continued, "Because you asked and I am merciful, I will tell you." She stepped up to Vader, her face only a few centimeters away from his.

"My children," she said with soft intensity, "Died the day you tried to kill me." She felt his reaction, a blast of hurt and regret, hitting her with cutting intensity before they disappeared, vanishing behind Vader's mental shields.

It was a long time before either of them spoke. She remained that way, staring into his mask for what seemed like an eternity, both of them struggling with emotions that neither could handle. Vader turned his head away at last, taking a few steps away from her side.

"Children?" He asked with what might have been a hint of hesitation.

Her confidence and anger began to sink to a deeper place within her, leaving her exhausted and almost unable to speak.

“Yes, children. Twins, a boy and a girl.”

A thought struck her, that this thing within the monster that stood before her was the only remnant of Anakin Skywalker, and that she was just telling him that his children died. For one, powerful second, she wanted to whisper his name and tell him that it was a lie, that their children lived and that they were beautiful, so beautiful...

The moment faded as she swayed, suddenly possessed by almost overpowering pain that came in a fresh burst as she almost collapsed on the floor.

“Padmé!” Vader cried out her name in fear as he rushed forward to brace her. Her eyes met his lucidly for a moment, and they seemed immeasurably tragic, bearing the weight the world’s sorrows. She collapsed then, falling into his arms for the third time.

He felt anger rising up in him then, strong and powerful. It was the same kind of anger that he had felt when he had been told of her death. *You killed her*, his master again said, with only the hint of a smile on his deformed face. *You*.

He set his anger and guilt aside as he felt her through the Force. She was fading, fast, her life-force being stripped away by the Emperor even as she rested in Vader’s hold. He tried to probe further into her mind, to find what he had done to her, but was immediately met by a shield he had not expected.

He saw visions of himself, from when he was young and wide-eyed. Was I ever that innocent? He saw himself as she saw him, strong and noble, her Jedi protector, her knight. He saw visions of himself when he was older, holding her in his arms...

He had forgotten what it was like to be Anakin, and for a moment, he lived those memories from his perspective, thinking dazedly, this is *me*. He felt everything in the span of a few seconds, until he managed to wrench himself out, to rescue himself.

He came back to Vader, to the man he had been for the last ten years, consumed by his own hatred, burning in his own flame. This is me, he told himself. *This* is me. For a blinding instant, he wished he could go back, return to being Anakin Skywalker, but then it was gone.

He gathered her in his arms, the most precious thing he would ever hold, and prepared to take her further up, to where his medical droid could heal her body, even as he tried to rescue her mind.

## Chapter 12

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### Chapter Twelve

Vader glanced over Padmé, who was covered only by a thin brown blanket. His medical droid, who was the only one who had seen the full extent of his injuries, was standing by, waiting patiently for Vader.

The Dark Lord finally acknowledged the droid, 4-6C, by raising his head. The droid took this to be a sign, and shuffled forward.

“My Lord, there are many minor punctuations of her skin, and she has been drugged extensively. She is too weak to be submerged in bacta. I am analyzing the samples of her blood currently,” it said in a high, monotonous tone.

Vader’s gaze seemed to sharpen and intensify.

“No permanent damage? Nothing that could cause the reaction she is having?”

The droid answered negatively.

“Her condition is... unexplainable, my Lord.”

Vader turned again to Padmé. If he could have massaged his aching temples, he would have. Instead, he settled for sitting heavily on a chair next to her bedside.

“That will be all,” he intoned heavily, sending the droid off.

He felt helpless and angry, his frustration building. What could he do to save her? His mind raced furiously through everything he had been taught as a Sith, finding and discarding possibilities. Finally, he lit on a solution, dubious though it might have been.

He reached out to her hand, not even thinking of the motion, caught up in the race to save her as he was. He felt her hand tighten abruptly on his as her whole body went suddenly rigid, all her muscles tensing. He was tempted to shout for the droid, but that would do no good. The sickness came from in her mind, and that was where he would have to eliminate it.

She relaxed, groaning unconsciously. He knew there was no time, but still took a precious moment to prepare for what he was about to do, steeling himself.

He reached out to her through their connection that had somehow not weakened, even through the years they had been apart, and through the fact that she loathed him.

*Padmé*, he whispered silently. He closed his eyes, seeing her in his mind... in her mind.

He was overcome by her presence that seemed to be so strong, even as it was fading rapidly. It washed over him in a wave of light, illuminating the darkest corners of his heart.

He felt her coolness and anger towards him. He felt desperate... she had to understand that he was here to help her, to keep her safe.

*I am here to save you*, he said into her mind. He only was in the smallest portion of her mind, only able to see what she allowed him to see.

He felt her disdain. *You, save me from anything?*

Desperation clawed at him, sinking its cruel fangs.

*You are dying.*

*What is it you want to do?*

He felt hesitation, almost embarrassment. To ask her to allow him this, even to save her...

*I need you to open your mind to me.*

He felt her incredulousness, to the point where he wanted to laugh with her at the ludicrousness of the idea. When he impressed on her that he was serious, that it was not a joke, her disgust and revulsion swept into him until they mingled with his own self-loathing.

*Please*, he pleaded. *It is the only way to save you from him.*

*Why should I trust you in anything, let alone in opening my mind?*

He broadcasted a vision of how he had seen her, lying limp, fading quickly, almost gone.

He felt her horror and fear before they were quickly repressed.

*How do I know you won't try to take my knowledge and use it for your master?*

Curiousness overcame him.

*What knowledge? What does he want from you?*

He felt her withdraw, retreating into the sanctuary of her own mind.

*I don't have to tell you anything.*

*I need to save you!* He repeated, feeling closer to losing her.

He felt her doubt, and as he was close to screaming, an answer came to him.

*Fine.*

A stream of images rushed into his head; memories, thoughts, all of them pure and radiant. He tried to ignore them, searching for the darkness which was killing her, rushing past memories that he would like to forget.

He found a trace of the shadow; a lingering evil, only a hint of it. He knew that that was not what he wanted, that she had not opened all to him.

*Padmé. You have to open everything to me.*

He felt along in her mind, gingerly avoiding memories of himself until he was at the shield which she had constructed. He did not try to combat it, but instead avoided it, knowing that it would bring back too many memories of Anakin Skywalker.

*You must let me see behind that shield.*

*You ask too much of me,* her answer came.

*It is the only way I can save you.*

*Perhaps I would rather die then give you full access to my mind.*

*You don't mean that.*

She did not answer, and he felt suspended in the network of her mind for what seemed to be like an eternity as she contemplated behind her final shield.

*What does it matter,* she finally said. *He knows... why not you?* He was too distracted to pay attention to her words, too caught up in the thought of losing her again.

He felt her shields drop, taking away the memories of Anakin.

He rushed into her mind, searching only for the shadow, ignoring all her secret memories and private thoughts. Something caught at the corner of his mind, something that whispered fast about *children*. He frowned and tried to discover what the fleeting thought had been, but was immediately repulsed by the idea, and continued the search for the shadow.

At last he found the shadow, wreathed as it was in darkness and despair. His spirit plummeted when he found that it resided in the darkness of his deeds, that it wallowed in the memory of his sins.

*You will not have her,* he said firmly to the shadow. He felt the shadow's surprise as well as its anger at being discovered.

*You are wrong,* the shadow said to him. *She is mine, and she will die.*

Vader felt hopeless to stop the shadow, for he knew its strength and might. He closed his eyes, gathering a burst of his rage against the shadow for even daring to lay a finger on his wife, his angel.

*You will not take her from me! he screamed as he hurtled a bolt of dark power towards the shadow.*

The shadow merely cackled as the rage he had summoned up did nothing to harm the shadow, for the shadow was a reflection of the anger, and only absorbed it into itself.

Vader wracked his thoughts and memories for anything that could destroy the shadow, for anything that could dispel it. There was nothing, and he sunk into despair.

A thought came to him, slowly growing on him until it was a possibility instead of a mere fleeting breeze through his mind. He tried to deny it, but the more he struggled against it, the more it gained in strength.

Vader, Lord of the Sith, carefully probed the side of the Force he had dismissed ten years ago, feeling like a child just learning how to master it. It felt like a muscle he did not even know he had, one that had slowly faded from lack of use until it was only a breath. He drew carefully, clumsily on the gentle radiance of it, pulling on his love until he was filled with it. For even a breath would be all he needed.

He sent the light at the shadow until it retreated, hissing back. Vader sensed that it was more powerful, that it could have overpowered him if it had chosen to, but that it had not. He

sensed all around her mind again until he was certain that the shadow had gone. He retreated, noting that as soon as he was gone, her shields locked firmly in place, sealing him out once again.

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Vader came back to himself. The first thing he noticed was the hand firmly locked around his, grasping tightly to the folds of his black glove.

Padmé, he thought, looking to her.

Sweat was beaded on her face, and she still looked an unnatural pale, with her eyes sunk into her face darkly.

But her chest rose and fell naturally in the pattern of sleep, and her hand released his slowly before falling against the metal platform she was raised onto.

Vader suddenly was aware of his own weariness, and he was too tired to feel even the beginnings of elation, too fatigued to celebrate her life and his triumph over the shadow. He had not realized what it meant to be weary, to long for rest until every fiber of him longed for sleep, and his eyes closed in dreamless exhaustion.

## Chapter 13

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### Chapter Thirteen

Vader woke to the sound of his own breathing. It was the noise that accompanied him everywhere, a constant harassment to his senses. When he opened his eyes to see everything in an ugly simulacrum, the first thing that met his eyes was the face of his wife, staring at him impassively, a foreign look to her face. She was wearing the dress from the night before; Vader realized that he had not given her anything else to wear.

"You actually sleep," she said softly to herself, but not softly enough for Vader not to overhear it.

"I am still human," he rumbled to her. "Humans sleep."

She nodded, turning her face away so he could only see the profile of her face.

"Padmé..."

"Thank you for saving me," she whispered, still not looking at him. "I am not without gratitude."

He wanted to come up to her and rub her shoulders, like he had before he had donned the suit that separated them. He wanted, just for a second, to drown himself in her light and warmth and to forget everything, to loose himself. She had the unique ability to make everything else around him fade away until they were simply together as husband and wife.

But one look from her was enough to put such thoughts out of his mind. Vader had forgotten how much he missed her. Subtle details about her, the way she laughed and smiled, her soft skin... he had lost those details in an overpowering tide of guilt and self-hatred. But now, with her standing a mere few feet away, it was almost too easy to remember.

Vader's mind, the part of him that was bitter and angry, closed out the thoughts of love, chocking them with hate. He could not allow himself such thoughts, for they would lead to releasing what he felt deep inside him; the regret he carried within himself, the feeling of inevitable tragedy. If he allowed them to, such thoughts would destroy him.

The momentary pause between them was broken by the almost obscene noise of 4-6C, who entered with a clattering, shuffling sound.

"My Lord, I have analyzed the drug found in her system."

The droid proceeded to rattle off a long, in-depth analysis of the sample. Vader simply stood and waited until it was done, and then turned to Padmé.

"I am not familiar with this. The Emperor must have been keeping it secret from me."

Although his words were calm and rational, there was a dangerous undercurrent to them, and the thickness of his rage could almost be felt.



Padmé turned away. If it had been Anakin, she would have found something comforting to say, something to soothe him. Instead, because it was Vader, there was nothing.

“My Lord,” said Vader’s protocol droid, who had come into the room noiselessly. “The Emperor commands an immediate audience.”

Vader hissed through his mask.

“Take her to her room,” he ordered the droid brusquely. His eyes met Padmé’s for one brief second before he was down the hall, cape whirling around him and looking furious.

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Vader stopped before entering the room in which the transmitter that would connect him to the Emperor was. He reached inside his mind, setting shields around all his thoughts of Padmé and how he had saved her. When that was accomplished, he walked into the room, which had a simple black hologram projector. He knelt on the floor, bringing up the picture of his livid master.

“Lord Vader, I have been informed that you have left your principal star-ship.” He felt, rather than saw, the Emperor’s lips curl from his teeth as the old man hissed, “Explain.”

“My master, I have had...” Vader’s mind raced, searching for an excuse. He found it. “...Complications with my health. The Jedi on Tatooine has injured me, and I found it fit to return home.” Vader allowed the lie to fill his mind until it became reality, a truth that the Emperor could seize and look upon. He bowed his head further until it was only through the Force that he could look upon his master.

“Complications? Why was I not informed?”

“Forgive me, my master. In my haste, I did not see it fit to inform you.”

“I see,” Sidious breathed. The Emperor’s voice continued on, commanding Vader’s attention utterly.

“Lord Vader, my apprentice, you are aware that any attempt to deceive me is pointless?”

Vader bit the inside of his cheek harshly.

“Of course, my Master.”

Vader was aware of the shadow’s probing of his mind. He forced himself to relax and allow it to, keeping everything about her behind his mental shield and allowing his only thoughts to be of revenge and anger. They were no less full or real; yet somehow, to him they seemed less fulfilling then before, less willing to drive him on. The dark presence retracted from his mind, allowing him to unclench his jaw.

“My friend, I have recently become aware of another presence in the Force, one of great power. It could be the Jedi from Tatooine that fought you, but I find that... unlikely.”

Vader wracked his brain, all his attention to the matter at hand. He was no less obsessed with revenge against the Jedi as he once was; he still hated them with a passion that was beyond reason. He was tempted to laugh when he realized that the ‘Jedi’ his master was

referring to was Vader himself, and that Palpatine had not known that his apprentice was the one that defeated him.

“It is uncertain, Master.” Vader spoke the word ‘master’ with as much respect as he had always, but the word felt suddenly dirty and unclean to Vader, and shame crept over him, shame for having obeyed the creature before him for the past decade.

“Heal, Apprentice. Once you have renewed your hatred, resume the hunt for the Jedi on Tatooine.”

“Thy wish is my command, Master.”

The robed face of the Emperor faded, and in Vader’s triumph, it never occurred to him once that deceit and trickery were the ways of the Sith.

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The Emperor leaned back in his chair, raising one finger to stroke what might have once been a human chin. Yellow, decayed skin hung off of him, and even in his intimidating presence, it was hard not to release a shiver of disgust.

He grinned, flesh peeling off his cadaverous, rotten teeth. His apprentice was a fool. Sidious had entered Padmé’s mind, wanting no loose ends. He had heard reports of Vader entering and stealing her, and it was another way to find out if it could be true. The presence that he had allowed to overcome him was undeniably that of Vader’s, but he had needed to know for certain. Now, he knew. All it had taken was the right words, carefully placed and Vader had betrayed himself and his wife.

Not that it mattered, anyways. If his apprentice was showing even the slightest signs of hesitation or doubt, he was of no use. It would be of no trouble to find himself another apprentice, one who could cast off the feeble shackles of love and dedicate him to the Dark Side.

The Emperor chuckled to himself as he thought of how easy it had been to pull the information from her mind. She had put up a brave but foolish attempt at stopping him, and he had gleaned everything he needed to know from her mind.

Twins, he thought. Children. Luke and Leia, she had named them. Unfortunate that she had no knowledge of their locations, but that was only a minor setback. His plans were proceeding well, and it was a simple matter of time before he located Skywalker’s children and took them for his own.

The old man cackled all alone in his chamber, the offensive noise echoing around the large room before it faded, leaving only emptiness.

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A/N:Muahaha! And so the plot thickens...

## Chapter 14

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### Chapter Fourteen

Vader walked up to his personal chambers in what could have been described as a daze. His thoughts were racing ahead of him, jumping to second steps. He was in turmoil after the events of the night before had sunk in, and needed time alone, uninterrupted to think.

He opened the door impatiently with a flick of his wrist, striding into the cavernous room before the door slid shut behind him.

His personal quarters looked quite different from the night before. The lighting was no longer a candlelit color, but a bright white light that illuminated everything in the room, revealing dark benches set across the room and a giant raised platform that bristled with needles and wires. It was where he slept, allowing him the freedom of removing the suit.

He walked over to a side of the chamber that was simply a patch of plain black, glossy stone and stared at it, not really seeing it.

He had saved her. Joy rose at the thought until what might have been a genuine smile came across his face. She lived, and was safe. He mouthed the word to himself. Safe.

But what concerned the Dark Lord more was the method he used to save her. He had drawn from the light side of the force, something that had changed him more than he was willing to admit. He had forgotten the peace and tranquility the Force had brought him, something that he had lacked for a long time. It was as if a gap had opened after always having been there without his knowledge, and had been filled until he had forgotten the name Vader.

But that was not true, he realized in a flash of illumination. The gap was not filled. He still longed for something else, something he could not name... The elusive word came to him with a suddenness that made his jaw drop and lean his two hands against the wall in a weakness that was brought on by everything that he had been avoiding.

Love. The need throbbed in him, making him clench and unclench his fist. Acceptance. Forgiveness. He needed her to be willing to touch him and smile and say that it was alright, that there was no longer any need for him to feel the emotions that raged within him deep below the surface.

“Master Skywalker, there are too many of them. What are we going to do?”

Vader saw himself as Padmé had seen him in that moment. A look came over his then-handsome face, and he raised his lightsaber. Vader wanted to shake his head, to deny to the cold monster of self-condemnation that it was not him, that it was someone else that was striking one child down after another... after another.

A snarl tore from him until it became a cry of anguish and then a yell, echoing with power over the whole room. There was no one to hear it, no one to tell him to stop blaming himself, to relax.

He thought of what he had asked of Padmé when she could not even hear him, the request he had made to her prone form.

*“Forgive me.”*

Vader’s hands left the wall, scraping soundlessly. She could not forgive him. The ache inside him would remain unfulfilled, and he would have to deal with the pain himself, for it was what he had wrought by his own doing.

His love for her seemed not to be the hope it always had been; it seemed to him to now be a curse that lit him on fire, that burned him in the throes of his own venom, the poison which had spread through him until it had killed all memory of Anakin Skywalker.

Even as he wanted to be at peace again, to rest at last from the emotions that consumed him and tore him, it could never be possible. Ten years of misdeeds did not suddenly become acceptable after a single repentance. That was the final irony, that even if he wanted to return to being Anakin Skywalker, to peace and love, that he could not, because if she did not forgive him, he could not forgive himself.

He grasped for the anger again, searching for something that could fill the deep chasm inside of him, something that could replace the need for love. It was not there, and he groped wildly for it, searching deep within himself until he came to the core of where all his bitterness sprung from.

Obi-Wan. His old master’s anguished cry of ‘You were the chosen one!’ rang in his head. Chosen for what, Obi-Wan? He questioned the Jedi silently, not daring to speak aloud. Chosen for this life, where I would almost rather die than live? Chosen to bear the life-choking weight of all my sins? Chosen to deceive you and try to kill my own wife?

Numbness and apathy gripped him until he was able to control his emotions, able to regulate the pain in the same way the machines on his body regulated his breathing. Every breath out, he let go of his pain, grabbing on instead to his hate and his anger. They seemed to be shallow, almost-nothings, but they were all he had, and they were all he could ever have, so he clung to them.

His thoughts were interrupted by an almost-sob, a wretched cry that tore the gasping hole in him open again.

*“Anakin?”*

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Once again, I promise that it will get lighter and less angsty later on.

## Chapter 15

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A/N— Once again, I apologize for the cliffhangers. I am addicted to them hopelessly. Thnak you for all the feedback! It helps me and inspires me to keep writing.

### Chapter Fifteen

*Her mind was in tumult after what had happened. She crossed her arms over herself, feeling immensely violated after what had happened, even more so then when Palpatine had entered her mind. Vader had full access to her mind, even if it was a couple of seconds. He had entered the place where she kept all her wishes and her most desperate secrets; including the one she treasured above all others.*

*Her children. She whispered their names aloud. Luke, Leia. She could almost feel them in her arms. With a pang of regret, she realized that she had not even had the chance to hold her infant twins before they had been ripped away from her. She frowned again, trying to remember more after her last words— “There is still good in him”— but could not.*

*Vader had seen the fleeting thought in her mind, she knew. She had felt his surprise and his curiosity, but... he had not tried to pry further into her mind, had not tried to unveil her secrets. That had spoken to her about the change in him more then anything else he could have said or done. And then, he had used the light side of the Force. The feeling in her mind, in her heart, had been like nothing else. He had drawn from his love, and she had felt it deep inside of her, in every breath that she had taken, she had felt it within her.*

*It had taken her a little while to come back to reality, the truth that Anakin did not exist. She had allowed herself to become lost in Vader’s shadow, in the man that he could have been. It had taken her looking on him when he was asleep to pull her out of the lie, the trap.*

*Still, even after that, part of her still longed for him, for Anakin. Some part of her had refused to give up hope, some part had refused to let the dream slide away. Some part of her knew that a part of Anakin Skywalker existed in the shell that was Vader.*

*The droid took her back to her room, moving almost soundlessly down the hallways. She forced herself to become familiar with the hallways, to remember the way they seemed to be arranged in a random pattern, when really, they were all placed in a decisive, logical fashion.*

*She had stared out at the surroundings a little longer, noticing with what might have been a slight touch of hope that the sun could be glimpsed through the clouds, and that it had stopped raining. She forced it down, reminding herself that this was Vader. Even if some part of Anakin remained, the simple fact did not change that he had slaughtered innocent children.*

*She forced herself to come to terms with the fact that it was Vader that killed them, Vader that committed those crimes in the name of saving her. That hurt the most, that he had somehow deluded himself that he was helping her by following the will of the monster that had declared himself Emperor.*

*She allowed her mind to separate the two forms of the man she knew as both her husband and a murderer. In her mind, there was Anakin, the Jedi hero who had fought valiantly in the Clone Wars, who had loved her with all of his heart. And there was Vader, the soulless murderer, who did not love her at all. The shadow of Anakin that she had seen was merely a temporary weakness of Vader, and not her husband. She could not bear to see it otherwise.*

*She still needed to talk with him, however. She and Vader could no longer exist in the castle together any more, not with everything there was between them. She had left the room, burying her doubts and fear deep within her heart.*

*When she had arrived to Vader's chamber, she had found the door securely shut and it appeared to be locked. She had tried to pry it open with her bare hands, but that was a foolish gesture that hurt her more than accomplishing anything. She simply waited then, outside his door.*

*She did not have to wait long. The door opened, allowing her a horrifying glimpse. Vader stood, with his hands against the wall, a yell reverberating around the room. The sound was pure anguish to her; the noise of Anakin Skywalker realizing for the millionth time what he had done.*

*It had forced her to reconcile Anakin and Vader, to realize that they were one and the same, that the defenses she had built up to protect her sanity were gone, and that the same Anakin that had sworn his love to her had sworn his allegiance to the Emperor. She stood, silent tears running down her face as her whole world crashed down around her, shattering the temporary peace she had come to.*

*At last, when she could bear silence no longer, she had cried out his name in hopes that he would hear her and recognize the deep part within himself that was the man that she had loved. That she still loved.*

*"Anakin?"*

*The word echoed around the chamber until Vader turned, his hands unclenched and fell to the side. She could not be sure, but she thought she heard a hitch in his breathing equipment. Her hands were spread out in a gesture of hopelessness, and her face was wet from too many repressed sobs that had longed to come, longed to echo out into the stillness.*

*They stayed like that for a long time, Vader watching her and her watching him, simply standing like that, everything else faded around them. It was him that broke the moment, him that disrupted the quiet.*

*"I am not Anakin," she heard his voice say with what she could have recognized to be resignation, almost defeat.*

*She walked up to him, tears streaming down her cheeks, all her shields completely open. He could read her thoughts if he wanted to, but she did not care. A small part of her even wanted him to.*

*"How can you say that to me?" She asked intensely. "After everything that you have done, and then to deny yourself? To deny me?"*

*"Anakin Skywalker," he said almost hesitantly, "Died long ago."*

She shook her head.

“Your scream just a moment ago denies that.”

She felt his anger and humiliation that she had heard that, had seen into his soul in a moment of weakness. She also felt a sense of deep frustration that ran in him, a sense of despair.

“What do you want from me?” He dropped his head and asked the question in a pose of utter defeat. She was able to see Anakin in that moment clearer than any other time. The truth of it all sunk in, and she wondered what she did want from him, whether she wanted him to be Anakin or Vader, her lover or her enemy.

“I want,” she said softly, “To see you without your mask on.”

Before he even said anything, she could feel his opposition and horror at the very thought.

“No,” he hissed at her. She felt all his old shields come up, the bitterness and anger return, and she knew that she had lost again, had been toppled in the battle for his soul.

He stalked away, and she felt him trying to regain himself, his composure. He failed.

“Get out,” he whispered. She felt invisible fingers begin to clamp around her throat, and he rumbled again, louder until it was a desperate scream, “Get *out*!”

She scrambled back for the door the moment the pressure on her throat lessened, recoiling in fear as the door slammed shut behind her. Her fingers clenched as her hopelessness returned. He has not changed, she thought bitterly, He has not changed at all. Her trembling subsided, and she breathed carefully, in and out. Once she was able to move without shaking, she put one foot forward after the other, making her way to her room.

## Chapter 16

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### Chapter Sixteen

Padmé stumbled all the way to her room, blinded by the rage she had felt. A growing sense of deep pain was growing in her, festering beneath the surface. Well, she thought detachedly, that did not go very well.

She had opened herself to him completely, showing him the side of her that hoped, the side of her that was not bitter, the side of her that loved him. In retaliation, he had tried to choke her. Her mind had raced when he asked her what she had wanted, and then, in one flash of illumination, she had known.

She wanted to see his eyes, to see if they were still the pale color of blue that she remembered. She wanted to look on him as he was with no barriers between them, and to be able to see if he still had a soul. She wanted to be able to know him, not as Vader, but as Anakin.

His reaction had stunned her in its intensity and violence. She did not know that she could have provoked him so utterly that he had felt angry enough to try to choke her. Bitterness clawed at her heart, entering like a slow, soft poison. Anakin had surfaced in him somehow, and she had crushed his slow awakening. She felt a slight regret that she had spoken so openly, that she had allowed her barriers to come down for even a moment.

There is still good in him, she thought desperately, trying to hold on to the thought, feeling it slipping away. He can be saved; I can bring him back. The yell he gave had been of anguish, that was for certain. It was his pain, she realized slowly. It was his pain that was laced in the yell; his guilt.

She tasted the word on her lips, uttering it softly. Guilt. He knew what he had done, and felt at least some kind of emotion about it. Anger was still there in her, anger at him, for all that he had done, but there was also hope.

Even in the dark bulk of Vader that was clouded with anger and hate, there was still Anakin, still the man that she loved, still the man that, through all his sins, could still be redeemed. Her breathing began to slow down, and the tears on her cheeks slowly dried. She was still repulsed by him, by all that he had done, by all that he had become. But Padmé, even in the dark clutches of Bast Castle, still felt a sense of glimmering, tremulous hope that shone through the darkness.

Her heartbeat stopped racing, calmness returned, and she drifted, not asleep, not awake, but still dreaming. For once, she was at peace.

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Vader paced through his castle, emotions warring in him beneath the surface. He stalked all the way to the main entrance, pushing aside the main door with the Force impatiently. He came to the bitter landscape of Vijun, looking across the rocky cliffs.



He could not believe what he had just done. He trembled, grasping at the wall of his castle as he realized that, in his anger, he could have killed her, could have lost her again just as he had found her. He felt disgust and hatred, hatred for the thing he had become.

She could never forgive him. He stared across at the fat, pregnant acidic clouds that threatened to come across his castle. If there had been even a slight chance that she would forgive him before, it was gone now, swept away. She could not forgive him, and therefore, he could not forgive himself. He did not pity himself; he knew he did not even come close to deserving mercy, especially from her.

He remembered the way she had asked him. *"I want to see you without your mask on."* How could she ask him that? To see his scarred, torn, ugly visage? Is that what she wanted? Vader closed his eyes, thinking of the man he once had been. That was who she wanted, the handsome hero. A bitter laugh erupted from him. He far from anything that resembled handsome, and her hatred for him would be complete if she ever saw him without the machine that kept him alive.

He remembered the way he had not understood what she had said at first, and paused until it sunk in. Anger had overcome him, painting the world in a red haze until he could barely understand what he was saying, barely understand what he was doing. It was not until the door slammed behind her that he understood, understood what he had done.

His ears picked up the barely discernable noise of the clattering of a droid among the noise of the howling wind. He clenched his teeth, angry enough to destroy anything that interrupted him.

The silver-plated D-9HP stood in the tumult of the wind outside, waiting patiently. Vader was struck with an urge to destroy the droid before it spoke in a thin, mechanical voice.

"My Lord, you are receiving a transmission from a starship stationed around Tatooine. They say that it is of immediate urgency that you communicate with them."

Vader growled deep in his throat but nodded and stalked inside, leisurely making his way to the same room in which he had communicated with Sidious. The vision of a nervous-looking man with droplets of sweat rolling down on his face was there. Rehis, Vader knew.

"My Lord Vader," said the man, bowing respectfully. "I think we have found something."

Vader folded his arms across his chest and gestured for the man to continue. Rehis swallowed before continuing his report.

"A transmission was sent to us by another Imperial ship, detailing information found in the torture of a smuggler by the name of T'iithe." Rehis looked down in his hands at something, and Vader was tempted to remind the man what happened to those who kept Lord Vader waiting.

"The man repeated a name to them of some kind of... hermit in the desert. This might be what we are looking for." The man frowned at the datapad in his hands, and Vader began to sense that this was something of interest, something that could be relevant.

"Continue any time," Vader said impatiently. The man nodded, looking up into the transmitter.

“He named a man that defined the description of a Jedi. The man lives out deep in the Judland wastes, and his name is... Ben Kenobi.”

## Chapter 17

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### Chapter Seventeen

The word echoed throughout the room, ringing in Rehis' ears loudly.

"*Kenobi?*" Rehis swallowed and nodded painfully.

"Yes, my Lord, that was the name given to us. We can recheck it..." His voice trailed off as Vader made a motion with his hand.

"No. I will be coming aboard my ship shortly." With that, Vader cut the transmission and whirled across the room, a terrifying black demon hell-bent on revenge.

Kenobi, he thought. Kenobi. Obi-Wan was clever to go by the name Ben, but it would not save him. Nothing could possibly keep him from Vader's wrath. Triumph descended over him as he realized that, at last, he would have revenge. He stopped abruptly in mid-stride as he came to a realization. Padmé. What was he going to do about Padmé?

He ran possibilities through his mind quickly. He could not leave her here, not in his fortress with its numerous traps that only he was completely able to evade... He would never trust anyone with her safe-keeping... Vader's mind lit dimly on the only possible solution. He tried to deny it, but it was the only one that made sense.

He would take her with him.

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Padmé floated in what seemed to be an empty void. She was not in time, simply drifting in the black... and a voice came to her, whispering nameless words to her. It took her a long time to identify it, and even longer to process what it meant.

Qui-Gon, she thought bewilderedly.

She was ripped abruptly out of the timeless, shapeless void by a noise. She blinked, knowing the sound before she could see again. Vader, she thought serenely. Anakin. The names still brought a rush of pain, but something else, something akin to... hope.

She sat up, and found immediately that Qui-Gon's voice was still there, and while it did not invade on her thoughts, it was still a presence in her mind. She ignored it as she stood up carefully to see Vader waiting patiently, his thumbs hooked in his belt in a cavalier gesture. There was still bitterness at him, still anger even as there was hope. She had not forgotten what he had done to her only hours before, and kept her distance from him.

She simply stood, crossing her arms and waiting for him to speak.

"I abandoned a mission when I came for you," he said at last. She blinked as the words registered, wondering why he was telling her this.

"My mission was to hunt down a Jedi on Tatooine," he continued. She felt immediate disgust at his words, because she had seen him kill dozens of Jedi before, and to hear him speak of it was even more revolting.

"I left before we identified him. Now, we have." Foreboding greeted his words. She slowly began to back away, feeling for the walls of her room as Qui-Gon's presence felt the same sense of trepidation. Vader advanced towards her.

"Obi-Wan," he said with a degree of triumph in his voice.

Padmé reeled, trying to absorb the hate that was coming from him, trying to deal with the fact that Obi-Wan was the one that had saved her after Mustafar. She knew that in him, there was the desire to kill. She could feel it rolling off him in waves, and she had to stop it. Killing his old master was a step that would bring him closer to the Dark Side... farther away from her.

He continued, seemingly oblivious to her pain.

"You will accompany me onto the starship and stay there when I hunt for him."

It was enough to sicken Padmé that he could simply come into her room and think that after having nearly tried to kill her that he could think that she would accompany him anywhere, nonetheless to the hunt for the man who had saved her from him. She knew that she had to try to stop him without provoking him, and without compromising herself...

"You can't," she said softly. She summoned up her courage and walked forwards, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palm. Vader made no response.

"You can't go," she said again. This time, he said something.

"Padmé, you do not know what he did to me. I do not wear this suit by choice."

She flinched a little at hearing her own name from his lips, but otherwise remained strong.

"The events of Mustafar do not matter." She allowed her voice to cool, to become gentle like it had been when Anakin was not in a suit. "You killed children, Anakin. You slaughtered them. Whatever pain you he caused you, it was only because he knew you had betrayed him. Betrayed me."

Vader stepped away from her, and she could almost feel the conflict within him, the self-loathing he felt, the guilt, the anguish. The hate grew in him until all the other emotions were passed aside. He turned to her, and she was suddenly very, very afraid.

"There is no forgiveness for him." She could hear the words he said silently after that; *or for me*. 'You do not know what you ask of me.' His voice grew until there was no hesitation in it, only raw hate and power. "You will come with me; there is no choice." A single tear rolled down her face as he began to step away, out of her room.

"If you do this," she choked out, "I will never forgive you." She thought she saw him falter, but then he was out of the room, gone to her in more sense than one.

A/N— Sorry about not updating until now. Real life got in the way, and I had a bad case of Writer's block, which should be purged from the Earth and sent to some distant planet.

## Chapter 18

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### Chapter Eighteen

Vader was only a few steps out of his door before he stopped and leaned against a wall, replaying her words over and over again in his mind. It was as if she had seen into his soul and chosen the thing that would hurt him the most, chosen the one thing to say that could make him doubt.

The need for her to forgive him, to love him, burned within him, almost drowning out the hate. The disgust in her voice, the sheer hatred that she had shown mingled with his own emotions until they became one and the same.

Padmé, he whispered her name in his head. His hate seemed to cool and shrink as tears ran down his face, tears of deep guilt and sorrow that he had carried within him for far too long. He wept for the younglings he had murdered then, for all the Jedi he had betrayed and killed. His tears were bitter, and he allowed the pain that filled him to escape, to let down the shields that encased his soul.

He remembered the only other day he had cried for his victims, then at Mustafar. He had wept for his victims then, and for himself, knowing that every single child and innocent he had sacrificed had been for her, to save her. To save her so she could save him. The rage had grown within him, a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach that curled within him, wrapping itself around his love until they mingled; hate and love and power all in one.

He felt like a child again, weeping silently in the dark. He had not cried often, learning to master his emotions. Watto had not been a gentle master. But in the early days he had cried, and his mother had always been there to put her arms around him and whisper in his ear that it would be alright.

Another person he had failed. His mother. Her memory brought pain to him as he remembered the first time he had killed for revenge, the sheer rage that had brought destruction to an entire band of Tusken. He wondered bitterly if she would be proud of him, if she would applaud the choices he had made.

At last he came to Obi-Wan. The name of his former master caused the blood to boil in his veins. Anger surged up in him, abrupt and terrifying. He had left Vader to burn, in more than one sense. The mere thought of killing his former master had been the force that had driven Vader for the last ten years, had been enough for him to continue the mad, reckless hunt across the galaxy for the Jedi.

Padmé's eyes came to him, her soft brown eyes turned bitter and angry. His whispered apology to her came to the forefront of his mind. A want rose up in him, a need to set all that he had done back to what it had been before, when she had loved him. But all he had done came rushing back to him, interrupting his fantasy, and there was only him, alone with the weight of his sins again.

A whispered solution came to him through the Force. He could never give up the vendetta against Obi-Wan, but... he could delay it, could he not? The part of Vader that hungered for blood howled that he needed to go, needed to find his former master and destroy him. The anger in her eyes came back to him, the sheer disgust he had felt from her. Perhaps... perhaps he did not have to go immediately; perhaps he could stay with her, for just a little bit longer in Bast Castle.

The manipulative part of Vader found a solution. He would only stay long enough for him to turn her around to his thinking, for her to realize that the only way was for her to become Empress and rule with him. Then, they would leave and go to Tatooine to bury the ghosts of the past before they proceeded to topple the Emperor. The solution stuck in Vader's mind until the power-hungry beast inside of him that had been newly awakened was satisfied.

Part of him knew he was deluding himself, that that was not why he wanted to stay with her, but he pushed that part aside. Now, all he had to do was tell Padmé.

He walked over to the door of her room and opened it unceremoniously. She was standing by the window, staring out at the landscape. He noticed that it was not yet raining, and that even the ugly green-yellow clouds seemed to form some kind of a beautiful pattern that reached across the sky. She looked at him, eyes shining with what he supposed could be construed as hope.

"I will stay a little bit longer," he said to her. A small smile of triumph lit her face, and Vader did not even find insulting. She came up to him, her cheeks glittering a little from tears that she had shed, and he thought he saw something in her eyes, a sort of gentleness that made him want to fall on his knees and beg her forgiveness. The thought that there was even a chance that she could forgive him, begin to love him again... he trembled slightly.

Her eyes were soft again, even though lines still surrounded her face, framing it in care and premature aging. The ghost of a smile graced her lips, and for once, they were not turned down in anger or hate. Her hand reached out, barely hinting that she would touch his gloved fingers. Vader closed his eyes, tears pricking at the corners of them. They were tears of guilt, knowing that he did not deserve to be forgiven, that he did not deserve to have her touch him.

He pulled away, walking to a corner of her room. He felt her eyes on him, heard the soft exhalation of disappointment. They were silent for a moment, Vader drowning in a flood of revulsion for himself, her simply watching, unsure of how to save him.

"Someday," he heard her whisper, almost so softly he could not hear her, "You will let go of the hate you have for yourself, and you will be able to forgive what you have done." He heard the gentle promise in her voice, the whisper of times to come that were not laden in darkness. He wished, for just a moment, that he could see what she saw, that he could touch the light for more than an instant without the darkness in his soul he had carried since Mustafar.

She continued, and Vader felt exposed beneath her, as if she could see through all the layers he had set up to deceive himself, that she could actually feel the center of Anakin Skywalker that lingered beneath the cruel exterior of Vader.

"On that day, I will be able to welcome my husband with open arms. Until then, you remain Lord Vader to me."

Vader heard the promise in her words, and for a moment, he felt as if he could reach out and grasp the future she set before him. But then he fell down, spiraling back into the blackness and despair that was all he could see. The darkness grasped him, whispering into his ear, You are mine. He turned to her, and spoke with a deep heaviness that weighed him down, sinking under the weight of his own guilt.

“Then Lord Vader I will remain.”

## Chapter 19

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### Chapter Nineteen

Padmé wrapped her arms around herself, deep in thought and not conscious of the gesture. She wore a burgundy gown with long sleeves that was awash in pearls that glittered softly in the harsh light of the outside. She had found it in her closet. It had not been there the day before.

She stood in a high tower that overlooked the whole castle, which was, she realized, enormous. Dark, sweeping spires towered above ebony roof-tops and grey landing platforms. Weapons bristled in areas partially covered by rock. Acidic, venomous clouds stirred above her, threatening to unleash themselves upon the castle.

The room in which she stood was plated with dark glass. The only thing that was not transparent was the door behind her and the ebony floor beneath her feet. Vader had showed her the room and the pathway to it, explaining that it was a good place to think and that he did not want her searching the rest of the castle for there were ‘many unseen dangers.’

She had felt the deep desire in Vader, the need to come back to her, the need to have her love him. His needs had been somehow transferred to her through the deep bond between them, and she had seen herself through his eyes. The pain that he endured had filled her until she had seen what she had thought to be the path, the way to lead him out of the shadows.

She had recognized that he believed himself to be beyond redemption, and that only he was keeping himself from the thing he yearned for the most. It was only he that kept himself from her love; it was only himself that refused to forgive his own sins. He bound himself in the shackles of Vader, refusing to leave his self-condemnation and hate behind.

So she had tried to allow him to see, tried to let him know that she was waiting, waiting only for him to release himself and allow her to love him. She had tried to reach out to him, had tried to touch his hand. Instead, he had recoiled, leaving her with a great sense of loss.

She had spoken with a clairvoyance and truth that she did not know she possessed. It had almost seemed to her not to be her own voice that had swirled around them, laden with truth and forgiveness. She had almost felt an energy pressing around her, prompting her to speak with gentle patience. She had almost felt it gather itself in her until she was posed in the light, bathing in it as she tried to save him.

“The Force,” said Qui-Gon, appearing to her by her side. She turned around, startled for a second to see the man she thought had died years ago to be suddenly by her side. She forced herself to relax and stare out the window instead.

“You felt the Force,” he said again, folding his arms across his broad chest. She did not say anything, simply content to stare out ahead.

“You felt the power of the energies that the Jedi serve in symbiosis; the energies that created Anakin Skywalker.” Now she turned to him.



"I am no Jedi, Master Jinn. And you—" she frowned. "You should not be here. You died by the blade of a Sith years ago."

He raised an eyebrow at her eloquently.

"You may not be a Jedi, but the Force flows through your veins. And as for me..." He paused, seeming to need a moment to collect his thoughts. "I do not live in the form in which I once did, but am in perfect balance with the Force."

She laughed harshly.

"There is nothing within me that could possibly merit a connection to the Force, Master Jedi."

He seemed to capture her eyes with gentle strength then, silencing her skepticism.

"You can save your husband, Padmé. He has been immersed in darkness for a long time, but there is still hope."

She heard footsteps approaching then, the loud, heavy noise of boots that could only belong to Vader. She looked to her side to find that the apparition of Qui-Gon had left, leaving her in perfect stillness. She heard him enter the room quietly, and she was careful to make no notice of his entrance. A pang of hurt swept over her as she thought of Anakin, who would have come up to her and wrapped his arms around her waist, speaking softly into her ear.

Instead, Vader came to stand beside her, calmly walking into the spot in which his first mentor had stood before. It had been a day since his cold pronouncement, and she still felt the hints of bitterness in him from that encounter. She would not break the silence, but only waited quietly for him to speak.

"When I built this room, I intended it to be a way for me to look over the castle; a way to guard my property." Padmé still made no response, not even turning her head to look in his direction. He continued, oblivious to the fact that she did not appear to be listening.

"Instead, I came here more and more often to think. It eventually became that I entered here to calm myself, and—" His voice caught, and then she turned to look at him. His helmeted head turned to her and a degree of softness entered his voice.

"This is where I came when I could no longer bear memories of you. I would come here to repress them, trying to forget you, trying to drive the haunted picture of you from Mustafar out of my mind."

She longed to reach out to him, longed to comfort him even as she knew he would reject her. So instead she nodded and turned away from him, looking out at the broiling clouds even as she felt a great weight bear down on her heart.

"If I would have known that you were alive..." He allowed the sentence to trail off into the air, weighing heavily on both of them.

"How long?" She asked softly. "How long have you been in mourning for me, Anakin?"

He seemed to ignore the use of his name, instead turning to her question with a deliberate single-mindedness.

"Ten years," he said, marking each word carefully. The parts that he did not speak she heard as well; for ten years, he had toiled under the crushing weight of his own, tremendous guilt and pain. For ten years, he had thought her dead, and had tried to purge his thoughts of her memory.

She allowed a small gasp to escape her lips. She only had memory up until the time when she had met Obi-Wan's eyes with her one final whisper, and ten years had passed since then.

"I... did not know that," she said quietly, almost to herself.

The silence between them stretched on. It was not like when she had been on Naboo, and they had basked in each other's warmth. This silence was stiff and uncomfortable. She sensed in Vader a growing unrest, which broke with his words.

"The man you want to love is gone. I am no longer the weak, naïve hero that you loved, Padmé. I can never return to that, and it is only delusion to think that there is still a hint of Skywalker within me."

He spoke the word 'Skywalker' with such derision and hate that it took her a little bit to recover. When she spoke, it was with the energy of the Force that flowed into her with a rush.

"You do not want to face the truth within yourself because you believe that if you recognize yourself to be Anakin, the weight of your sins will overcome you, and you will be lost."

Her chin lifted as she came closer to Vader, not touching him, but still reaching out to him clumsily through the connection they shared. And when she spoke, it was not with the golden light that flowed through her; it was only herself, speaking as she would to her husband.

"Anakin," she whispered softly, a yearning expression on her face filled with hope, 'If you would only discard the hate you carry within you, you would not be lost.' She came closer to the impenetrable, unreadable black mask. "You would be found."

A snarl of rage came from him and he turned from her, walking to the opposite side of the room, bracing his hands against the glass. She followed him, a whirl of crimson silk.

"You cannot deny it forever," she said harshly. Anger stirred in her, fed by his continuing silence. She only wanted him to *see*, to realize that his salvation was close, if he would only come with her, only turn himself from the emotions that destroyed him from the inside.

"One day, you will realize that you are Anakin Skywalker, whether or not you want to admit it right now." She stepped back, talking to his silhouette. "You can only pray that I will be there on that day, and not lost to you again."

That elicited a reaction. He turned to her, and she felt the sudden panic in him.

"You are never leaving," he growled. She felt a sense of forbidding power in the room, and fear clenched her. "I will never loose you again," he said, towering over her. Her eyes flashed a little before she nodded slowly.

"You are right," she said slowly, stubbornly. "I will not leave you until you cast off the shadow of Vader."

She felt his thick frustration and pain, and once again reached for him.

“Anakin... take my hand. I am waiting for you; all you have to do is come.”

He turned away again, and she was tempted to scream.

“It is too late for me. Don’t you see?” He turned to her then, and she could almost see his eyes with black hurt in them.

She closed her eyes, suddenly weary. It was in the stillness that she saw the eyes of the child he had cut down peering up at her. She knew that she was seeing what he saw, what he was tormented with. He was afraid to face himself, afraid to come to the light, afraid to admit to himself and to her that he still had a soul, for if he had a soul, he could not possibly forgive himself...

“I see,” she whispered. “I see far too well.”

There were no more words between them. He left, stalking out the door wordlessly. She stared out at the landscape, with all her hopes hanging on a man who was supposed to have died by the blade of a Sith twenty years ago.

A/N Thank everyone so much for all the kind and generous words. They really mean a lot to me. There will be another chapter on this and then an interlude. After that, there will be anywhere from 3-12 chapters. I plan to write a sequel, but I will need to catch my breath for awhile. Once again, thanks for the replies!

## Interlude

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### Interlude

Time passed. Hours turned their meticulous strokes into days, and days turned slowly into weeks. The fortress at Vjun was impenetrable to time; there was an eternity contained in the castle.

Padmé learned more and more from the Jedi Master, absorbing and folding the light unto herself as it held her and taught her. She managed to keep this all a secret from Vader, who was absorbed in his own conflict. She thought often of her children, sharing her concerns with Qui-Gon Jinn, who nodded and promised her that the time was near when she would see her daughter and her son.

Vader was immersed in his own battle, too blind to see the changes in Padmé. His soul was a battleground, with his own hate and despair on one side and his wife opposing them. He was ripped apart daily by conflict that threatened to swallow him whole. He ached for love and redemption, yet kept himself from them. It was a bizarre sort of self-punishment. He searched for anger and hate, finding them to be suddenly empty for him, nothing more than emotions. For his love was more than an emotion; it was his life.

Slowly, things began to change, tilting the balance. Padmé would be gentle to him while still somewhat impassive and cold; he was not the man she loved, not yet. She would see deep inside of him, down into the depths of his heart, to his conflict, fear and love. Vader would try to shield himself, try to appear to be the cruel Sith Lord, but they both knew it was an empty façade that fooled no one. His life was a constant masquerade, and the mask kept slipping.

They were both often plagued by memories, for they began to share thoughts and emotions. Whenever he had a nightmare, which was often, Padmé would wake, sweating, knowing that it was his torment that had awoken her. Whenever she thought of Anakin and the time on Naboo, Vader would remember the same times, not with nostalgia, but with bitter pain. Every memory of the man he once was tore at him, for he knew that was what she loved, that was what she hoped for. Bitter shame and resentment would rise then, and he would remember Obi-Wan.

As time passed, Vader's desires became clearer in his mind, less illuminated by shadow. All his thoughts of revenge and anger were slowly passed off, and he thought more often of Padmé and their love. An aching, burning need became lodged within him to come back to her as she so often promised, for things to be as they had been. But that was when the nightmares started again, and he was constantly reminded that nothing could be the same, that he had done too much. He wanted to undo all that he had done, wanted to right all the wrongs, but that was impossible.

Guilt would overcome him at times until all he could do was simply stand, weeping for all that he had done. The resolutions he had set in place at Mustafar, the determination to set his old life behind, seemed to him to only be fleeting fancy. Nothing was certain anymore. Padmé

would sense his guilt but she was unable to help him, unable because he would not let her. He was so repulsed by himself that he could not bear her kindness.

She felt it, knew it deep within her that all he needed to do was forgive himself and then he would be able to love her, would be able to return to Anakin Skywalker. Things would never be the same as they had been; she knew that, but she still knew that if he managed to forgive himself, they could perhaps start anew, and they both would find a semblance of peace. She often thought of this, closing her eyes in a blissful dream. She waited for him, sensing the conflict within him, the burning hate almost doused by his intense love and want for redemption.

Vader was slowly coming to face the demons he had buried for years, buried under layers of shame and frustration. Padmé began to feel a sense of urgency through the Force, as if there was suddenly a new need to hurry, as if her time was running out. Qui-Gon spoke increasingly of the need for haste, although he would not tell her why. For the Emperor was still planning, and his plots were beginning to take form, casting a shadow over the unprepared inhabitants of Bast Castle...

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A/N— Thanks so much to everyone who reviewed! I cannot express in words the gratitude I feel towards people who read and take time out of their day for my story.

Sorry that this chapter was so short, but it is helping set in place the events of the next few chapters, in which a whole lot will happen.

In other news, I am leaving to go on a trip to my Grandparents' and will not be back until Saturday, which means you can expect a post late Saturday evening or on Sunday, hopefully.

## Chapter 20

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### Chapter Twenty

They were in his personal chambers. Soft, violet light swept over them, quietly illuminating unobtrusively. They sat on a hard, cold bench together. There was only silence, each left to introspection. Vader's breathing echoed around them, the only noise in the stillness.

Padmé wondered what she was supposed to do, what Qui-Gon wanted of her. She had tried to make Anakin see, but he was simply too stubborn, too much in pain to acknowledge her. She could feel his thoughts beside her. They were a frantic flurry in his soul of guilt, loathing and repression. He repeated the cycle over and over again, with almost no hope of a breakthrough.

A thought rose to the surface of his mind before he shielded it from her. She got a vague sense that it was important, but carefully did not try to pry into his mind. It was not like she could, anyways. He overpowered her in the Force, easily dwarfing her abilities.

She turned to him, sensing the conflict deep within him.

"Anakin," she whispered softly. It was both an accusation and a caress. She saw him flinch, however slightly. She filled her mind with images of him as he had been, knowing that he would see them. She slowly allowed them to trickle away before replacing them with him as the overbearing Sith demon he had become.

He got to his feet, and she could almost see his lips thinning into an angry line, his blue eyes narrowing in anger and... she closed her eyes, identifying the other emotion buried within him. Shame, she thought with a sinking feeling. Shame.

"I asked you once before," she said, standing but not moving from the bench, her voice echoing around the room clearly. "Will you deny me again the chance to see you as you really are?" She came up to him, speaking to the cloak that was draped over his shoulders. "No masks," she implored. "Just... things as they are, as they were before."

She felt his reluctance and horror, but also a small chink in his armor, a possible way to get through to him, a part of him that was not as dedicated to keeping her from seeing his real face.

"Things can never be the way they were before," he said bitterly, brushing her aside. She felt him collect his thoughts before he turned to her. 'I... am not as I was before,' he said with a touch of imploring agony in his voice. "The Anakin you long to see beneath the mask is gone."

Her brown eyes blazed with defiance as pity enveloped her. She still felt revulsion for Vader, but she had begun to understand him, begun to see into the hideous world he inhabited. The more she saw into his soul, the more she felt her disgust slipping away, although she still retained a healthy measure for the man who had murdered children.

“Do you think that I loved you because you were handsome, Anakin?” She asked the question in a measured tone of voice, trying to keep herself from yelling at him in her frustration.

He said nothing. The silence in itself was an accusation in itself that felt like a knife twisting itself into her heart. But she continued, because she could sense his resolve weakening. If she could only look into his eyes, then she would know. She needed to be able to see him, and she sensed that some part of him needed her to see him as well.

“If you would embrace who you are, nothing would matter any more,” she cajoled gently. “Our love...” she paused, knowing that he was listening to her intently.

“You speak of the love between you and Anakin Skywalker,” he hissed. “There is nothing within me that resembles him. I am transformed; I have left everything of his behind me. His feeble guilt, his pain... it is all gone, Padmé.”

He was clinging to the lie, perpetuating it only because it was easier to accept than the truth. She shook her head gently, allowing a stray lock of hair to fall loose and come across her face.

“You will come back to me, Anakin. The least you owe me, after all that you have done, is a glimpse of you without the mask.”

She pushed at his mental barriers, allowing her love to swell and tip over into him. She sensed a wellspring of longing, of deep want there. She closed her eyes and managed to find Anakin Skywalker buried deep within Vader. His presence was enough to illuminate her, even buried as it was. She accepted the rest of him, as bitter and angry as it was, gathering it all unto herself.

Please, she asked him softly. Please.

She felt him withdraw slowly, guarding his thoughts from her.

She opened her eyes, thrust back to the real world. She sensed his eyes on her, and calmly waited for him to make a decision.

“You do not know what you ask of me. This... will not be easy for either of us.” A wave of relief swept over her, and she nodded.

“I know, Anakin.” She took a breath, gathering her dignity and putting on what Anakin would have called her ‘Senator Face.’ “I never expected it to even resemble easy.”

He came up to her, and for a moment, she was overpowered by the aura of power he seemed to exude. But then, she realized that his intentions were far from sinister.

A black glove reached out and hesitantly, clumsily, tried to caress and smooth the bland expression out of her face. She allowed him to touch her for a moment, but then pulled away, hearing the hiss of his breath as she walked away from him.

“You are not my husband,” she murmured to him. “Not yet.”

She felt the disappointment from him in the Force, the agony and guilt that streamed from within him. She caught a sensation of powerful regret from him, and she looked up to meet

what she imagined to be a blue-eyed gaze. She looked away before it could affect her, and felt him move to the door of his quarters, doubtless to consult with his medical droid.

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Vader stood before 4-6C, conversing with the droid.

“How long will we have without the mask?”

“You will have about thirty standard minutes with the temporary respirator, My Lord. It is smaller and allows more mobility, but it also limits breathing functions more than the standard helmet.”

Padmé nodded guardedly.

“It will have to be enough.”

Vader turned to her, and she felt reluctance from him.

“Padmé...”

She shook her head with a small smile.

“It will be alright, Anakin.” She swallowed, knowing how empty the words she was about to speak would seem to him.

“Trust me.”

A/N— I am floored by the delightful comments on this story I am receiving! Thanks so much to everyone who has reviewed— it really means a lot to me.

Meh, I wasn't really sure about this chapter... it was kind of slow to write, but I can pretty much promise everyone that the events of the next chapter will be what everyone has been waiting for, and most of you probably won't be disappointed.



## Chapter 21

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A/N— Thanks so much to everyone, especially Ar-Zimraphel and VA-Parky. Your reviews are what keeps me going when Writer's Block interferes.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Padmé felt a sudden chill and wrapped her arms around herself. The chill had nothing to do with the carefully maintained temperature in Vader's quarters, and had everything to do with what was about to happen.

Nervousness grasped her. It felt to her not unlike the reunions they had after Anakin had been gone fighting in the Clone Wars. The feeling was the same, the mixture of anxiety and hope. So much more rode on this now; she would be seeing the full extent of his injuries, and there would be nothing between them, nothing to shield either of them from the truth. She would still love him, but convincing him could be a problem.

She remembered a conversation with Qui-Gon that rose suddenly out of the swirling mist of her mind.

*"You have heard the prophesy of the Chosen one?"*

*She nodded at him.*

*"Yes. It always hung on Anakin's shoulders; it was far too much of a burden for him to bear."*

*She saw something in the Jedi Master's eyes that almost seemed to be a hint of sadness or regret. Qui-Gon had been Anakin's greatest hero and mentor, and his death had impacted her husband more than he had been willing to admit.*

*"There were... many mistakes made with Anakin." He shifted, moving on to an easier subject for himself. "He is still the Chosen One, Padmé. That has not changed."*

*His eyes gripped her, forcing her to look into them and hear his words.*

*"The decisions made now as far as he is concerned will impact lives all across the galaxy. The future is unforeseeable. The entire weight of the Force can be shifted by your and his decisions now, and they will either liberate us or sink us further into darkness."*

*Padmé stood for a moment, absorbing that. When she spoke, it was with a gentle peace and strength.*

*"His choice has to be his, and his alone. I will not manipulate him into completing the prophesy through using our love."*

*Qui-Gon nodded sagely.*

*"Love can perhaps save him. It is all he and you have left. Perhaps it will be enough."*

She took a deep breath in and let it out. The hiss in and out of Vader's constant breathing suddenly stopped. It had become a background noise to her in the time at Bast Castle, and hearing it cease was unnerving. It was replaced with a weaker, sicker noise of a respirator.

This is still Anakin, she reminded herself. I can do this; he is my husband. Our love will be enough.

The first thing she heard was the loud sound of his boots on the metal floor. She forced herself to breathe as she concentrated on his feet emerging from behind the platform he slept on.

She felt his gaze on her, and ignored it, allowing her eyes to travel slowly up across the path to his face. She reached his shoulder and took one last breath, gathering her courage.

She looked straight into his eyes, not even noticing the terrible scars that arched across his pale face. His eyes were the same color of bright blue, and they were filled with vast, sweeping remorse, guilt and pain. They were Anakin's eyes, and even though she thought she had prepared herself for all possible outcomes, for all possible sights, she found herself losing control at the sight of his eyes. Everything came into place, and she was reminded of the younglings he had murdered, reminded of the look of hate in his blue eyes.

She forcibly calmed herself, drawing on the Force as she gazed into his eyes. He fell to his knees, the loud slap of them hitting the floor filling the chamber. Eternity seemed to come and pass as they stared into each others' eyes, no words necessary.

All shields and boundaries were down, and they flowed into each other through the Force until there was nothing left between them, nothing left more to understand. She encompassed his pain, taking it unto herself until it was a part of her, just as much as her love and forgiveness was part of him.

Somehow in the flood, the race of images that they exchanged, somehow through the swirling tide of emotion, Padmé managed to keep a small corner of her mind private. Somehow, she still managed to retain the secret of her children.

He dropped his head, and the spell was broken. She saw tears slowly falling down his face; tears of bitter guilt. She managed only then to take in the rest of his face, the physical deformity that encompassed him. She saw the light blue device that went from the base of his neck, circling around to attach needles in his throat. Only then did she understand his humiliation, the horror the once-handsome man must have felt at losing a part of himself.

When she spoke, it was with a clarity that surprised her. She did not know that she could even breathe, let alone speak after all that had passed.

"Is this the price you paid?"

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Vader paused, trying to collect himself. In her eyes, he had seen horror that he knew transcended his appearance. The horror was not for what he looked like; indeed, it was for what he had done. He felt weakened and tired, struck down by his own conscience.

She had seen everything he had done. She had flowed into his presence the same way he had entered her mind, and it was all over. All hope for forgiveness and redemption was lost

and gone. Guilt ensnared him, binding him with impenetrable darkness in chains of despair.

He was lost. Truly lost. He had begun to see that, begun to realize that his only hope was to turn back, to come back to the man he had been before. But he also knew that such a thing was impossible. He had known it that day standing in the Chancellor's office after having struck aside a Jedi Master in desperation. The look on Mace Windu's face from so long ago floated before his eyes.

He had committed himself to the Dark Side then because it was all he could do. There had never been any hope, not even a single whisper of wanting to come back before it was too late, before he passed the point of no return, because the second he had chosen Padmé over the Jedi, he had passed that point. Now, after ten years of misdeeds, there was no hope, no light that was strong enough to pierce the darkness. He longed to reach out and touch the light as he had before, but it was simply impossible. Despair crawled over him, and he wept.

"Is this the price you paid?"

Her voice was kind and gentle and strong. He could sense the light within her, the way she belonged to the Force, the way it captured her and lifted her. He was unworthy; he was a despicable creature that had no right to even look upon her in all of her glory. Yet he somehow conjured the strength, somehow found the willpower to speak although he could not lift his head.

"This?" He asked bitterly in his thin voice, feeling the promise she had made of their love evaporate into the air. "The price I paid was in every day knowing that you were lost, that you were dead, and that it was me that killed you. The price was in rising every day to loose even more of myself because there was no hope, there was nothing except pain."

He felt her pity come to him, and he despised it. He was not worthy of pity, not after all he had done.

"I continue to pay the price," he rasped, "In knowing now that I am beyond hope, that you will never forgive me."

He felt a fleeting triumph that he had finally spoken the words, had finally expressed to her and himself what he had known all along. Now all that would happen is that she would agree, would refuse to forgive him because that was the less painful path, the one in which he would not have to face the inner demons that had tormented him for so long. For her admitting it would be a kind of defeat for her, and then they would be able to go back to the easy, clear-cut world in which he was a monster that had no soul and she was his prisoner-wife. That world would be simpler and easier, and if he could convince himself of the façade, there would be no more pain.

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Padmé felt his pain, the deep longing that no words could express. She could sense that he was on the edge, that he was teetering on the balance, that he was so close to coming back to her.

She walked up to him slowly, her feet padding softly until she stood before his kneeling form, staring blankly at the ground. She knelt before him, and felt his hackles rise because of the self-loathing he carried within him. He did not want her to touch him, because it would

complicate things beyond measure, it would give him more pain. But he did not realize that it would also save him, would also alleviate the sorrow.

"Anakin," she whispered softly. It was not an accusation, it was the gentle call from the woman who had been his wife. It was the name of a small boy on Tatooine who had been selfless enough to risk his life for that of a stranger. It was the name of the hero who had been applauded throughout the galaxy for his bravery and brightness. It was the name of Obi-Wan's pupil and brother, the name of a man who had known brightness and unity.

And, more than all that, it was the name of the man she loved. It was the name she had whispered to him in the silence and bliss when they were alone. It was the name of the man who had wanted to be the father of her child. It was the name of her protector and husband, the man in whom she had complete faith and love. *This is the happiest day of my life.* She remembered that day and wept silently in her heart.

She caught a memory and gave it to him, allowing him to see through her eyes. *I know... there is still... good... in him.*

*Come back to me,* she whispered to him. *Forgive yourself; it is the only way.* She allowed him to share in her love, allowed him to come and live for a brief instant in the world of light she inhabited. And for a moment, she saw and felt the man he had been before. For a moment, she saw blue eyes untroubled by anything rise out of the darkness, and she knew that it was Anakin, that it was her husband, that he could hold her again.

The next sensation she had was being wildly shoved aside by a huge, invisible force that shoved her away towards a wall. She barely managed to catch herself before she slammed against the wall of Vader's room, unharmed but shaken. She closed her eyes, knowing that it was only his desperate attempts to shield himself from Anakin Skywalker that had prompted him to hurt her. Still, she could not suppress a bubble of anger that rose in her, and she knew how damaging it could be to him.

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Vader's breathing came quicker than before. Every inhalation was a struggle, much like the one raging in his heart.

He had hurt her. Again. He felt a burst of hate swell in her that mimicked his own. Deep anger at himself rose, warring with the sorrow within him. He had not known what it was that had prompted him to dip into the deep wells of anger in the Dark Side. It had been almost unconscious thought that had prompted him to do so. All his self-hatred had rose up at her insisting that it was letting go of his revulsion that would save him.

She asks too much, he thought wearily. Too much for him to let go of the only things that had pushed him forward for the last ten years.

He saw her slowly get up, and concern overrode everything else. But he still did not move.

She came up to him again, but did not kneel to see his face as she had done before. He knew the words of hate and condemnation that were bound to come, and he closed his eyes in preparation. But, strangely enough, she did not say a word, and when a few seconds had passed, he opened his eyes slowly.

Large, soft brown eyes looked into his, and he flinched away from the gentle kindness in them.

"I will never condemn you, no matter what you have done," she said at last. Vader expected the words to sting, to burn him until he was lost again in a tide of hatred, but they did not. He felt vaguely amazed that anyone could be that selfless, that anyone could love him that much, that anyone could forgive him. The words seemed to somehow calm the tide within him, somehow seemed to drown out the darkness. He had not expected that, and struggled for a little bit, trying to find the anger that had always seemed to be a beacon leading out of the storm.

He could not find it, and even as he fought the love that rose within him, he felt parts of himself coming back into focus, parts of Anakin Skywalker. He remembered his old benevolence, his old calmness and determination, and who he had been. He had always remembered himself with bitterness and anger, but somehow he did not feel those.

For a moment, she caught and held his eyes. He knew that she could see the change in him, that she could sense the reaction her words had started. And even as he tried to resist, shying away from the explosion in his soul, the love filled him more, swelling a storm within him. And for a brief, heart-splitting moment, he saw everything as it could be.

He saw himself with Padmé, out of the suit, smiling and laughing with happiness. Himself in the dream turned, and he caught a glimpse of blue eyes that radiated peace and tranquility instead of despair. Then the dream faded, but the promise did not.

For the first time, Vader realized that he had a choice. He began to see that he was no longer bound to the life he had chosen; she had liberated him.

On one side, there was the path of darkness and despair. It was the path he was on, the path he had followed for a decade. He sensed that it would take him deeper into the darkness until it consumed him, swallowing him whole. He sensed from the path alluring power, power that he could take and hold until the galaxy was his own.

On the other path, there was light. He saw Padmé on the path with a gentle smile, waiting for him. In a moment of profoundness, he realized that she had always been waiting, always been calmly there. All he had to do was forgive himself, and let go of the hopelessness and the denouncement on his soul. It was there, he could feel it... all he had to do was ask...

He waited for one moment more, weighing each side. He wanted to right the wrongs he had caused, he had a burning desire within him to set everything as it had been before he had fallen into darkness. He had not seen a path before, not seen any other alternative to despair and anger. But there was one, and it now lay at his fingertips, he realized with a sensation that might have been joy.

"Padmé?" The word came from his lips before he could stop it. She had turned away from him, facing the bench. Her eyes met his as she turned around, and he could sense that she knew then, knew the changes in him, the conflict deep within his soul. A small smile lit her face, and he felt joy and love merge within him.

"Anakin," she breathed, and he thought with his new awareness, Yes, Anakin. For that was who he was; he was Anakin Skywalker, her husband. Realization dawned on him slowly until Vader was too late to stop it, and the darkness began to slip from him, falling away, loosing its

grip on his heart as a new light entered him, filling him whole. But there still was a shadow of doubt, still a lingering cloud that hung over him.

"I... I want..." There was no doubt in his mind what he wanted, but still the words seemed impossible to say, impossible to even think.

She came up to him, softly sinking down until her eyes met his. She reached down to his hand, holding it softly, and he did not resist.

"I want you to forgive me," he finally burst out. She smiled gently, and he was reminded immediately of her beauty.

"I have, Anakin. The only thing that remains is for you to forgive yourself." He thought, truly thought about her words. Was there forgiveness from himself? Could he begin to see past what he had done? The face of the murdered child hung before him. It took him a moment to discover the feelings he was having. There was still a touch of the same disgust and self-loathing, but there was also something else behind it. He realized that it was sorrow.

He thought of the potential of that child, of all the other children he had slaughtered. He thought of the cruelty and unfairness of their deaths, and the fact that their lives had been cut short. And tears ran down his face, not tempered by self-pity, but only of pure grief for his victims.

It was me, he thought slowly. It was me, all me, my fault. The words a female Jedi had shouted at him before he killed her rang in his mind. *"You will never be forgiven! The weight of your sins will overcome you until you have died in your soul, and all that will remain will be your hatred and pain until they destroy you from the inside."*

Her prediction had come true. He thought bitterly, This is the real prophesy of the Chosen One. No, something within him whispered. *This is not what you have been chosen for, Anakin Skywalker. There is something more for you, even though you have done terrible things, blinded by your twisted love and arrogance. But there is hope*, the voice within him continued. *There is still a way you can redeem yourself*. How, he asked the voice within him. How? The answer came. *Ask her*.

He repeated the question to her, his tears fading.

"How?"

She raised her head, every bit as regal and poised as she had ever been.

"You can start making amends, Anakin. You can undo the bloodshed you have wrought by helping to bring down the Empire that has risen in the ashes of the innocently slain." A small smile illuminated her face. "You can bring down the Emperor; not for personal gain, but so a new Republic unfettered by corruption and intimidation can rise. Your sins will never be forgotten, but in time, they may be may be outdone by your selflessness. And it may be enough."

Vader absorbed her words. What she called for would be a sacrifice of ambition; he would have to let go of the dark dream he had carried within him for domination. He clung to the dream for a moment before he realized that it would be bought with blood and that in it would only lay more emptiness and pain.

Perhaps he could begin to start healing the galaxy he had wronged. It would never be completely enough, and it would not be an easy life, but it would be a good one, and he would be free of sorrow. Perhaps he could, once again, take up the mantle of a Jedi knight. The thought was odd in his mind; he had exterminated all of the Jedi, hunted them out and slaughtered them. Well, not all of them, he amended. There was still Obi-Wan.

"I... will," he said, binding himself to the promise of Anakin Skywalker. For a moment, Vader protested, reminding him of all the power he could have, and the fact that she could be lying, that she would never really forgive him. And, for a moment, Anakin was tempted by the power, tempted to believe that she was lying. But then, he banished the monster within him, and there was only Anakin.

It felt good to be Anakin Skywalker, he realized slowly. He re-learned his name, saying it slowly. Anakin. Once he was done, he felt almost as if he could weep with happiness. He reached out to the Light Side, flexing it like a muscle he did not even know he had. All the darkness he had felt, the despair and the anger, it all felt like it had been a bad dream, and that he was finally awakening from it. The pain removed itself until it was no more, and he was free, freer than he ever had been.

He was no less powerful than before, yet suddenly he felt motivated, he felt foolishly optimistic and youthful. It was such a change from the bitterness he had felt earlier that he laughed. It scraped the nerves of his throat and hurt him, but he continued, simply because it felt *good* to laugh.

He could feel the joy and triumph ascending from his wife. He turned to her with bright blue eyes, and saw her self-assured grin. All his joy faded; to be replaced with a deeper, longer-lasting infinite love, one that rose in him until he could hardly breathe, hardly think. It quieted him, and there was still one question that remained.

She sensed his sudden disquiet, and moved closer to him until they were standing only inches apart.

"I love you," she whispered with no finesse. It was a simple statement, and yet spoke volumes to him, filling him whole with compassion and tenderness. 'I have never stopped loving you, even when you were encased in the shell of Vader.' She shuddered, and he was tempted to wrap his arms around her. "When I saw you kill the younglings, something within me died. It took me a long time to realize that it was not my love, but instead my hope."

Anakin was painfully reminded of the suit when she brushed up against his breastplate, bumping against the devices that kept him alive. With wide eyes, she captured one of his tears with her fingertip and brought it to her mouth, tasting it.

"I have found my hope, Anakin. I have found it in you," she said softly. An indescribable wave of emotion came at her words. Elation almost painful in its intensity rose in him, setting his soul ablaze. Love swelled in him, and pride, pride that she had been able to see all along what he had not.

He swallowed, almost unable to contain the flood of peace and happiness that had rose at her words.

"I love you," he whispered thickly. "I always have... forgive..." His words trailed off as she put a finger to his lips. The risk of infection to his old wounds did not seem to matter to

him. Nothing mattered.

Their souls met, entwining in a blaze of love and light that encircled Anakin. It purged all the darkness in his soul, until he was everything that he had been before. Everything passed before him in that moment, everything that had happened, everything that he had done. And it was all forgiven. A huge weight had been lifted from him, and he could finally smile.

He did not realize that he would kiss her until his lips were on hers. It was a tender kiss, not marked by desire or passion. It was the first time she had touched him in any such way, and he found himself knowing that he was not worthy. And not caring. His gloved hand came to rest in her hair, pressing her lips into his with more intensity. He loved her; she was his life, his every breath, his every thought. She was his and he was hers; there was nothing more than this that mattered, that ever had mattered. It was just them, and it would be just them forever.

And as his soul raised itself higher and higher into the night, he found something that he had thought he had lost forever. He found peace.



## Chapter 22

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### Chapter Twenty-Two

It was Padmé that finally broke the kiss. She did not step back, but allowed his arms to encircle her. Peace and love had swept over her too, and for the first time, she felt truly safe. She stroked the side of his face softly, barely even noticing his deformity.

"I would stay in your arms forever if I could," she whispered. Tears of joy pricked at the corners of her eyes, and she relaxed in his hold, content to be safe. She had missed simply being with him so much, missed being able to have him encircle her until there was nothing else in the world besides them.

She allowed them one more moment of sweet peace before she turned to him.

"We risk exceeding thirty minutes, Anakin."

He turned to her, and she saw a flash of bitter resentment in his eyes that unnerved her.

"If this is the only price we pay, we should consider ourselves blessed," she reminded him. The anger disappeared, leaving a look of weariness in his eyes even through the love and joy that surrounded them.

"We will find a way," she persisted. "You will not live in that suit forever."

"It is what I deserve." The words were not marked with bitterness or anger towards himself; it was a simple statement of fact.

She nodded.

"Yes, it is, but through grace and mercy, we will find a way."

He took her by the hand, needing no more words. He led her like a small child to behind his bed, where 4-6C waited impassively. She saw the helmet of Vader lying on a small table next to a large chair and swallowed. It would not be easy to watch him return to the mask that was a symbol of dark, mystical power and hate.

Only then did he turn around to face her.

"Even behind the mask, it will still be me. Nothing will have changed... love."

It was the first time he had called her love, and the rightness of it, the feeling that he should always call her 'love' flared up in her, making a grin come across her face.

"I will know," she whispered with sincerity. She captured his gloved cybernetic hand and brought it up for him to feel her say the words, laying his hand on her lips. "I promise."

4-6C had grasped the front part of the mask with one of its long, spindly digits, and was waiting calmly for Anakin.

He sat down on the chair, his eyes never leaving hers, firmly grasping her hand. No words were needed between them.

I love you, he said through their connection.

She smiled, and allowed the peace and benevolence that came from within her to wash over him.

The face-mask steadily lowered until it hovered directly over his eyes, which still held the strength of Anakin Skywalker. Then the mask lowered, and she saw the impassive black mask of Vader. But his presence in the Force did not dim or waver, and she knew that everything would be fine. His grip on her hand tightened, and she realized how it must hurt him to return to the confines of his old life when he had just begun to start anew.

The helmet lowered until the transformation was complete. 4-6C pressed a few buttons on the buttons that regulated Vader's breathing, and the hissing that accompanied the dark mask breathing started again.

Only he did not seem the same, not to her. The mask and suit were just as frightening and intimidating as before, but the aura he gave off of limitless power and fear was gone. He was transformed, she realized with a deep feeling of contentment in her heart. He was reborn, leaving forever his old self behind.

She reached out to him through their bond. She could sense something that glimmered beneath the surface of his soul. She used her rudimentary powers to seek it out, to discern its nature. When she finally realized what it was, she gasped.

There was power that flowed in Anakin. She could sense the way it moved, the way his whole self was illuminated in the glowing rays of the Force. She had only begun to understand the sense that everything around her contained a seed of the light, and to find her husband was illuminated with it, that some part of him was the light, that he only had to reach out to encompass his true potential, even though he was weakened and crippled...

"You're beautiful, love," she murmured distractedly, too caught up in the flow of his gentle strength to mind what she was saying. She did not open her eyes, even though she sensed him stand up behind her.

She sensed him catch just a part of the magnificent light and use it to caress her through their bond, warming all her senses. She was floating, suspended, breathing, dancing in love. She let loose a gentle breath of contentment.

His arms encircled her, reaching around her stomach. It was an awkward move since he was much taller than her and had all the bulk that came with the suit of Vader, but she recognized its intent.

"Anakin," she sighed, and it was the name of the man who had loved her so many years ago on Naboo. The two Anakins in her eyes melded together, forming one single, unwavering image before her eyes.

He slowly began to rub her stomach, and her shoulders tensed before she realized what he was doing.

"Our children," he murmured in her ear, and she felt a sense of loss permeate her through the Force, cutting in its intensity. When he had been Vader, he could have not mourned them, and now that he was Anakin, he could truly grieve the loss because he had Anakin's desires.

Padmé was tempted to wail and shake with grief, an intense emotion that left her stunned, unable to breathe for a second before she realized that it was Anakin's grief that she was sensing, his sense of mind-shattering pain.

My children are alive, she reminded herself, slowly shaking off the effects of his grief. Luke, she recalled with great effort, remembering her tiny, newborn son. Leia. Great love filled her, and the joy that she felt knew no bounds. She turned to tell him, to blurt out the words. *This is the happiest day of my life.*

And then she was reminded of the mask, the symbol of who he was, of who he had been. He felt her joy and her hesitation, and his hand moved up to smooth her hair.

"Padmé?"

She wanted to tell him, wanted desperately to blurt out the news. *A father, Anakin! You are a father!* But something within her told herself to wait. Not yet, her intuition whispered. She frowned, telling it that he should not have to wait any longer. Cold dread seeped into her as she thought of the Emperor.

Too soon, the voice advised. Too soon to tell him; he has just come back to you tonight. Allow him to prove himself. She wanted to tell the voice no, that this was her husband; this was Anakin. If anyone needed to know, it was him. But the voice insisted. Sense his tiredness; it can wait 'til tomorrow.

She reached out to him, and found that indeed he was tired. A profound weariness had settled in him, and she sensed through the joy that he felt that he desired rest. No, she frowned, it can't wait until tomorrow! This is our *child*. But she felt the slow progression of cold logic in her heart until she was forced to give in, forced to dampen the joy within her. Tomorrow it would be then.

"Nothing, Anakin," she said, waving her hand nonchalantly. She sensed his hesitation in the Force, but could do nothing to resolve it. It faded eventually, leaving her feel guilty. That soon washed away in a tide of love again as it broke over her and Anakin. She relaxed, allowing it to fulfill everything within her. They were bound together, sealed permanently. The ceremony at Naboo had been simple ritual, nothing more. Now, they were truly married in every sense of the word. They had come out through the crucible stronger.

Her hand snaked over and grabbed his where it lay on her shoulder. She brought it up to her cheek, allowing it to lay there in peace.

"You are tired," she finally said. "Sleep."

Anakin nodded, and she once again sensed the profound weariness in him. He was joyous but tired; he had just fought a battle and won.

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He lay in the tube, with wires and needles bristling from all over his body, keeping him alive. The sound of deep, peaceful breaths could be heard. This was the only time he was truly free of the suit. Highly concentrated oxygen was pumped in and out of the box in which he slept. While it allowed him life, if any other human was to breathe it, it would be too

intense for their lungs and kill them. One hand was poised over the transparent glass; on the other side slept his wife.

Her long brown hair cascaded, flowing around her shoulders. She perched comfortably on a couch that was laden with soft, silky pillows and blankets, forming a nest for her. Her features were older and hardened, more so than they had been in her youth, although they were softened with serene calmness. She wore a soft red shimmering gown that cascaded around her, flowing from every curve of her body. One hand, the dressing gown falling from it, had reached out almost unconsciously to the transparent glass that encased her husband.

Their hands spread out, human flesh finger for hard metal artificial finger reaching for each other notwithstanding the impenetrable glass shield. They formed a kind of unity together, binding and holding with a gentle promise. And it was enough.

## Chapter 23

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A/N— Just a heads-up to everyone, I am leaving on vacation in two days for a week. After that, I'm going to be home for a day and then leave again for another week somewhere else. Crazy, huh! There is a slight chance that I will be able to update the first week or on the day I get back, although it is slim. This story probably will be about six more chapters, and my goal is to finish it before school starts. And thanks very much for all the replies! As for some of your questions, I am afraid that I can't answer them and they won't be answered in this particular part, but will be addressed in the sequel I am planning.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

The Emperor sat in shadow in his throne room on Coruscant. Darkness weaved its way around him, wreathing him in it. It was of no particular comfort to him at the moment as he seethed, cold dark fury almost palpable in the air.

He had sensed the sudden tipping of balance in the Force. He had shrunk from the light as it had thrown off the darkness in Vader. His apprentice— former apprentice, he reminded himself— was of no use to him now. The light had spun itself around him and his wife until he was gone, lost to the Emperor forever.

The Dark Lord reminded himself that it was only a temporary imbalance in his plans. He was still searching for the Skywalker children; the search would merely have to intensify. And he would have to take care of Vader sooner than he had planned. He hated to lose an apprentice before gaining another, but it was necessary. Anakin was a factor that had to be eliminated. He leaned back in his dark throne with a hideous grin. Yes, that was what he would do.

He gestured impatiently to one of his aides, a sallow-skinned, nervous man. He brought forward a large, bulky object that he quickly set down and tinkered with until it produced the shape of one of Palpatine's minions, an intuitive general.

"General Nilar," the Emperor hissed. The man bowed in deep respect, paying homage to his master. Nilar was force-sensitive, and knew enough that he was cunning, but not too much to be a danger. Palpatine waved his hand, prompting the General to stand straight again quickly; he had no time for the pomp and ritual that went along with his office.

"You will lead a battalion of my best troops to Vijun and Bast Castle," Palpatine ordered. "There, you will eliminate the man who was once known as Lord Vader along with a woman known as his wife, Padmé." He paused on her name, relishing in the anguish he knew seeing his wife die would plunge Anakin into. "Kill her first."

Nilar bowed again before turning abruptly with military precision, doubtless to relay the order to the rest of his fleet. The Emperor leaned back, closing his eyes and drawing on his dark powers, drawing them around him like a cloak. He sensed the changing tides in the Force, but did not know which way they would turn. He knew with a touch of anxiety that things had not been in so much turmoil since he had overthrown the Republic and pronounced

it an Empire. But even he could sense the impending doom that was hanging over Bast Castle, and allowed himself a small smile to savor the moment.

---

Padmé woke to the same synthesized light she had fallen asleep to. She blinked, raising her arms in a stretch before noticing that Anakin had left. She remembered their last night, and unconsciously reaching out to him until their hands were almost touching through the glass. She smiled a little bit at the memory.

She reached out through the Force to him, and was not surprised to find him in the tower he had led her to. She was not advanced enough to know what he was doing, although she could feel the light around him.

Come love, he reached out to her. Come here.

She grinned and pushed herself off the sleep-couch, every bit the young lover she had been ten years ago.

Coming, she teased him.

She slowly made her way through all the dark corridors and passageways that made the way to the high tower. She shivered a little bit; now that she could sense more through the Force, she could tell that the place was brimming with traps in the Force laid by Vader. He had carefully instructed her exactly where to walk and what to do, and now she understood why.

The whole place seemed more forbidding and evil to her then it ever had, and she began to look forward to leaving it with Anakin. It had been a place of darkness, and it would be good to leave it behind.

She came upon him in the tall tower, realizing with a slight flush that she was still dressed in her slightly revealing nightgown. It was irrational for it to bother her; when they had first been married, they had slowly acquainted each other with every inch of skin on the other.

He was sitting straight up with his legs crossed and his hands raised upright. She caught a great sense of frustration within him, and she knew that it was because he was less powerful then he used to be, due to the fact that his limbs were no longer flesh and blood.

That was before she sensed him in the light. The seed of potential she had sensed in him the other night had bloomed, encompassing all his potential. The light flowed around him and into him; he was the light, and it was him. There was no distinction in her mind between him and the brightness of the Force. It was beautiful, in its own way. She sensed within him a great struggle and effort, and it was, she realized, to touch the light that he had not used for so long.

Come, he said to her through their bond, and a wave of loving-tenderness rushed over her, illuminating her in the light he was. She knew then what he wanted him to do.

She sat by his side, not touching him physically, but merging once again with his presence. She held herself in the same way he did, flowing into the overwhelming tide of light until she was no longer there sitting on the floor on Vijun. She was away, wrapped and floating in a pool of golden energy that flowed through her. She had always been awed by Jedi skills in a

battle, and now she understood. It was not them that was blocking the blasters and whirling around; it was the light directing them.

He appeared to her in her vision, not as the scarred, pale man he was, but as he had been with golden hair and a roguish smile. He in the vision extended a hand to her, and she saw his eyes burn with desire. She smiled and took it, knowing that for every movement they pantomimed, they grew only closer together in the Force.

He led her through all of the glowing brightness until they were at its core, at the very center of it. There, he turned to her and held her by the hand, and on his face grew a calm expression.

“There is no emotion,” he said into the stillness of her heart, where there was only a calm, serene quiet love that burned bright. “There is peace.” She absorbed it into herself, allowing the lesson to be absorbed into her mind until it was a part of her.

“There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.” She allowed him to teach her the truth and strength of the ideas the words represented, the foundations of Jedi Code that had stood for thousands of years.

Before he could go on with the rest of the code, she recited with a smile, “There is no passion, there is serenity.”

In his eyes flashed astonished surprise and what might have been pride, but it soon vanished, leaving only a calm cool.

They finished together, slowly reciting the last line.

“There is no death, there is the Force.”

The light that she had felt growing inside of her swelled, bursting over her in a sudden explosion that enveloped her, waking her from the Force-dream.

She opened her eyes to find herself sweating and still sitting by Anakin’s side. She smiled as she realized that she was still able to feel the light, still able to touch it easily from within herself. He had come out of the meditation pose, and was staring at her. She turned to him with an uncertain smile.

“Where did you learn the code and meditation?” He asked abruptly.

She hesitated. The Jedi Code had been one of the first things Qui-Gon had taught her, with the warning that it was not all it seemed. She wanted to tell him that his former master still lived in a sense, but if Qui-Gon had not revealed himself to Anakin, then it must have been for a reason.

“I... I can’t...” she allowed her voice to trail off, hoping it would be enough for him. When he did not respond, she sighed and continued.

“It will all be revealed to you when the time is right, Anakin.” She placed her hand on his arm. “Trust me.”

She felt a vague sense of distrust and anger through their bond, and responded to it by allowing the love she felt to overflow into him, strengthening him and purging all doubts. There was one thing that she could tell him, however, and she took a deep breath in

preparation, allowing her calmness to return. She did not know whether he would react with joy or anger; joy that he had children, anger that she had kept it from him for so long.

“Anakin,” she paused, searching for the right words. His sense of tender, loving concern flowed into her, and she absorbed it, grateful. She remembered all the times they had talked of the child she had been carrying, and then of the only glances she had of her newborn babies.

She allowed some of those thoughts to flow over into him, until his curiosity was piqued. He nudged her, letting her know that she could tell him anything, enveloping her in a blanket of love.

“I have some wonderful news,” she said slowly, turning to him. Where could she even begin to start? She searched for her thoughts, trying to find some way to tell him.

But before she could, a low, pulsing alarm echoed all around them. Anakin sprung up with surprising mobility, running over to a discrete panel laid in the wall. When he looked back up at her, she sensed a deep terror that ran in him, not for him, but for her.

“An Imperial fleet has amassed outside of Bast Castle, and is preparing for invasion.”



## Chapter 24

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A/N: And here I return:p Lol, but seriously thanks to everyone for your continuing partience with me. Camp was great, and I got actually a lot of planning and plot work done.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Anakin watched her freeze in reaction to his words, her teeth clenching and eyes widening. Even as afraid as she was, she was still beautiful, still his angel, still the very thing that caused him to draw breath. Fierce, oppressive, nearly overpowering protectiveness rose in him. The Imperials would never have her; he would kill them before that happened.

Dark fear clenched in him, encircling him with its talons, wrapping around his mind; fear that he thought he would never have to feel again. He shut himself off from everything for a moment, even as his mind raced furiously.

I will not loose her, he promised himself with steely determination. Even if it requires my life for hers.

He grabbed onto her arm, opening himself to her once again. Love and calm flowed into him until he was a composed Jedi Knight again, realizing the urgency but not succumbing to it. He allowed it to fill him whole until he was able to see clearly again and not through the red haze of anger.

“Take all we will need to the ship,” he instructed gently. “I will stay here and hold them off for as long as I can, creating a diversion for us to pass by.” She nodded silently, placing her hand on his and closing her eyes. Love flooded through him, curing all the fear he had felt, striking at the dark monster that lived in him. It swept over him in waves, illuminating every corner in light.

Into the silence, she whispered, You will never loose me. Do not fear, Anakin.

He returned her love just as intensely, melding his soul with hers until they were one. She gasped quietly, breaking their bond and looking up at him, eyes searching the mask. He knew what she had seen there, what she now knew.

“Leave,” he said suddenly. The way she had reached out to him, submerging him in her light, bringing peace to him, had only solidified what he had already known. “If I do not come for you within an hour, leave and do not look back.”

Her eyes betrayed her shock, the slight flaring of her nostrils her indignation at the very idea.

“Anakin...”

He shook his head, dislodging her hand from his. He sensed her eyes watching his every movement, and swallowed. They were wasting time they did not have.

“Promise me,” he said, not looking at her. “Promise you will do what is necessary if you must.”

He felt her stubbornness and gritted his teeth.

"It is all you can do for me, Love," he whispered, just loudly enough that she could hear it. He had been misguided, not able to see the true path, but now he had. His love for her was boundless, arching across the vastness of space and back into his heart.

She nodded quietly, backing out of the room and into a run. Anakin stood for a moment more before striding down the hallway to the room where he kept all the main controls to the missile turrets that lay disguised, death lurking to the men who would have dared to threaten his wife.

---

General Nilar watched the world below him with interest, stroking his closely-shaved chin as he stood, simply standing at a floor-length window that gave him the position to both command his men and watch his target. He had learned this from Vader, whom he had served under, watching the dark presence with both awe and lust; lust for the dark power Vader carried.

He smiled a little bit at the irony. He had observed the Sith Lord from the shadows, noting the way Vader commanded with absolute authority, the way everyone trembled in fear at his approach. There were no mistakes to be made under him, and Nilar had understood and learned from the Sith Lord, using the skills he had learned to climb his way up the Imperial ranks until he was worthy enough to come to the attention of the Emperor.

From his dark master, he had only glimpses of the true power that he knew there was. He had been taught to use what he had always thought of as luck to do small things that were of no threat; simple maneuvers that could turn the tide of a battle in his favor if he concentrated hard enough. But there was much more, he reflected quietly. Much more; he only had to prove his worthiness.

And things were proceeding quite nicely from where he stood. Vader would be destroyed by Nilar and his fleet. He did not know why the Emperor had issued the order, but it would work to his advantage all the same. With the right hand of the Empire gone, there would be a gaping hole in the fabric of the tightly controlled military; a hole Nilar intended to fill.

Power would come with his new station as the Emperor's most trusted, and he would learn enough until he would easily be named as the old man's successor. Despite all appearances, the ruler could not live forever. An unholy smile lit Nilar's face. And even if he could, Nilar would find a way to end his life, natural or not. He knew his plans were far from complete, but he still allowed himself the luxury of scheming.

He turned his attention back to the planet that swirled with green-yellow clouds; a cauldron, brewing something sinister within its depths. Nilar savored the moment for a moment longer, then turned to his second-in-command.

"Move in closer."

---

Padmé hoisted the dark crate, struggling a little under its weight. In it was food, water and medical supplies, as well some clothing. She had packed it with speed she had not known she

possessed, speed born of desperation. On the top were blasters.

The two droids followed behind her with more packages, necessary additions. She gave up her struggle with the crate, swearing in a manner most unbecoming to the regal Naboo Queen she had been. Sweat beaded on her upper lip as she pulled on the powers that Qui-Gon had showed her, using the light to lift up the package and levitate it. It took enough effort that she began to appreciate the work it took to become a Jedi.

She walked with her mechanical entourage down the halls, dressed in loose robes, contemplating what was about to happen. She trusted her husband; there was no doubt of that. But in him, she had sensed the need for revenge on those who would dare to even attempt to harm her; and she was afraid, not for her, but for the monster that could be aroused in Anakin.

She made her way, deftly striding through the castle until she reached the landing the ship was perched on. She quickly loaded everything into the storage area, appreciating the subtle modifications Anakin had made to the ship that she had not been able to see before.

After that, she simply sat in the co-pilot's chair, her thoughts a whirling, spinning thread of turmoil. She reached out to Anakin and found him unaware of her presence, so caught up was he in the battle that would soon rage. She sighed, waiting, every sense heightened in preparation.

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Nilar stood on the command ship, surveying his fleet. It was almost laughable that so many men were required for such a simple job, but he understood very well why it was needed. He closed his eyes, preparing for the battle ahead, to speak the order to prepare landing parties, one of which he would lead. Nilar knew that his presence would install fear in his troops, causing them to be far more efficient and less lax. They could see Vader's castle spires peering through the clouds ahead, a dark looming presence.

His rudimentary Force ability was not enough to prepare him for the attack that came suddenly, with no forewarning. The command vessel buckled wildly, dislodging several soldiers from their seats. He snatched the rail in front of him, not wanting to show anything that could be construed as weakness.

When the ship stabled itself, groaning as it righted itself slowly, he snapped at the officer nearest to him, "Damages?"

The man swallowed as information streamed through the screen in front of him.

"We have lost two smaller ships, General, and several larger ones, including this one, are weakened. The attack seems to have come from hidden missile turrets in the fortress itself, sir."

Nilar was far too refined to swear, so his only reaction was his face turning slightly paler, his lips compressing slightly more. When he spoke, it was with venomous, controlled, hard rage.

"Prepare my shuttle and instruct all other starships to do the same. Flank us, shielding us from the fire. Destroy anything that tries to come out of there, and obliterate the turrets."

Nilar's thoughts were already whirling ahead to the next step, and he smirked, knowing even in the height of his rage that Vader could not destroy every shuttle that was preparing to land, and that if even one got past, Nilar would have accomplished his duty

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Padmé felt rather than saw the smaller ships streaming forth from the larger ship like maggots emerging from a rotting carcass. She knew that Anakin would need help, that even in the depth of his strength, he would not be able to repel all the intruders and create a successful diversion.

She called the light to her, marveling once again in the sheer depth of it, the way it encompassed the entire world, blending her and folding her into itself. Once she was assured of her strength, she reached down calmly to grab the blaster that lay at her feet. It was a clumsy, unsophisticated weapon, and she once again appreciated the Jedi, this time for their choice of weapon.

Purpose filled her until she was set, determined and prepared to do what was necessary. Even in the midst of the anxiety and fear, there was a sort of nostalgia that rose in her, for there was no despair while he was at her side, nothing that they could not overcome, no matter how dire things seemed.

"I will not lose you," she whispered softly, knowing that he heard her, knowing that by the time the words registered in his mind, it would be too late to stop her.

## Chapter 25

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A/N: D'oh! It seems that I uploaded a different chapter accidentally when trying to post this one .I am very embarrassed, and thank you all for your patience with me and my lack of computer skills.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Anakin stalked furiously, frustration gnawing at him and making him grind his teeth. There is no passion, he reminded himself. There is serenity. The platitude seemed empty compared to the anger that was rising inside of him, nothing more than *words*. How could *words* quell the fear in him, the foreboding that had lodged itself deep inside of him? He found his patience in knowing that she was safe, knowing that she was alive, safely sheltered in his ship.

He triggered another round of firing at the small ships that were being carefully sheltered by the bigger ones, allowing the large starships to absorb the fire. It was a frustrating strategy, and one that was paying off slowly in favor of his enemy. He managed to destroy some of the shuttles, and felt the deaths through the Force. He had to remind himself that it was either their deaths or Padmé's, and the thought set his blood swirling.

A ray of energy arched out from the largest ship, destroying one of the turrets. He forced calm to come to him, forced himself to become a Jedi again. He allowed the light to hold him and guide his movements until he was at ease, ready for the upcoming fight. The shuttles were almost to the planet now, about to touch down on the barren soil of Vjun.

He walked over to the controls, sending out one last round of fire. It would be all he could afford; soon, he would be too distracted to get to the controls. He would finish off all of the Imperials, and then go with Padmé to his ship, where they would leave quietly after thrusting another ship, on auto-pilot, into the middle of the fleet. It was not the ideal situation, but it would be enough. After that, they would set the whole castle to destroy itself, clearing the abomination from the landscape along with the Imperials.

They were now entering his castle, streaming through the halls like insects searching for a morsel of food; he could feel them. There was one among them who was somewhat strong in the Force, he saw. He would have to watch that one. It was as it had been before, the same feeling of gentle strength flowing through him, directing him, guiding him. The only thing that was missing was Obi-Wan.

All other thoughts were wiped away as he felt an unmistakable presence come closer. Before he even opened his eyes to focus them upon the unremarkable grey door, he knew. It was Padmé.

---

She entered the weapons room, which was tucked in a discrete corner, but not so hidden that they, or the Imperials, could not find it.

The first thing she felt was a blast of anger and frustration mingled by fear. It hit her with such intensity that she actually staggered back for a second, falling into Anakin's black-plated arms.

"What," she heard him growl, "Are you *doing*?"

She levered herself calmly out of his grasp.

"Coming for you, love. There will be no possible way for you to carry out your plan without me. We leave together or not at all."

"I wanted you safe!" He pleaded with her, allowing a note of desperation to enter his voice.

She smiled at him again, allowing the confidence and love that she felt to merge into his doubt, overcoming it.

"Where am I safer then with you?" She whispered huskily.

Before he could respond, blaster fire surged into the hallway, missing her only closely. Anakin snarled and reached for his lightsaber, pushing her further into the room. She ignored him and went over to the controls, allowing herself to fall deeper into the current and discover the way the controls worked. She saw what each would do, and calmly sent off another barrage of fire towards the ships that hung above Bast Castle.

In the meantime, Anakin was engaged in a small fight with the squad of troops. He dodged their fire easily despite the limitations of the suit, ducking and weaving in-between them, coming to slice armor and flesh from what seemed like no where. If any of them had survived, his fighting skills would have spun their way into legend. As it was, he managed to defeat them all, coming out of the fray with only slight wounds.

He turned to see Padmé at the controls, forcing the Imperials to reconsider their positions and strategies, keeping them on their toes. Almost all of the turrets were destroyed, however, and the battle was beginning to turn in the favor of their enemies.

"We must leave," he said to her. There was no thought of anger in his mind at her for coming after him; there was only a pressing, pounding sense of desperation.

They came cautiously out into the hall, slowly making their way silently through the castle, the noises of their passage covered by the clanking of Stormtrooper armor elsewhere.

Padmé heard a loud scream coming from somewhere behind her, and whirled, eyes searching the hallways. There was nothing, and then another scream. Anakin pulled on her hand, not wanting her to pause any longer than they had to.

She turned towards him, her eyes searching the dark mask.

"What..."

"That," he said slowly, "Is why I was careful not to let you roam the castle unescorted."

Her eyes widened, and Anakin felt another twinge of regret at what he had done as Vader, however useful it seemed now. But there was no time to feel, no time to think; there was only time to run. And so they did.

---

Nilar stood at the top of the balcony that overlooked the main entrance to the castle. Stormtroopers were streaming in, forming a huge force despite those who had been destroyed in the attacks from the castle.

The General could hear screams now and then, echoing off the castle walls. It took all of his dignity to prevent him from wincing; Vader's home was, of course, very well protected.

They still had not found Vader and this... Padmé that the Emperor had spoken of. It galled Nilar to know that they could be escaping even now. Frustration crept up at him; frustration at the thought of his ambitions and plans being thwarted.

But... something came to him, barely more than a whisper that happened to float on the wind to his ears, as if by simple happenstance. It tugged at him, telling him to leave. It was a feeling, a gentle suggestion. Come with me, it said. And Nilar was perceptive enough to follow it, motioning discreetly to his elites, signaling them to come with him, leaving command to another, the glory to himself.

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Anakin raced with her down corridors and passages, leading her as he deactivated alarms and traps. He finally reached his destination, which was the place from which he would set the whole castle to destroy itself.

He quickly entered a complicated sequence into a small keypad. The code, Padmé realized, after a few seconds, was the day she had been born. The realization of such a simple thing that her husband had done, even in the deepest darkness of Vader, filled her with warmth, and she tightened her grip on his hand slightly in a gesture of affection.

Revealed under the metal plating was a simple switch, looking deceptively harmless. She was about to laugh before she realized that he was closing his eyes and reaching deep into the Light side, unarming whatever devices he had to in order to flip the seemingly innocent switch. As it was, it flipped down on its own accord, without him even touching it. There was no alarm, no blaring signals. The end would come to Bast Castle swiftly and silently without warning.

He took her hand tenderly, and she could almost feel his crystalline blue eyes burning into her eyes and thus her soul, her very self. Love flared in her in a sudden explosion, swelling in her, consuming her whole. It was the most intense love she had ever felt, flaming within her, surpassing everything, and she blazed with it, wanting to scream and cry and laugh all at the same time. It stemmed from Anakin, coming to her in rays of golden light, wrapping her, binding her, becoming her, unifying her until she was whole.

"Anakin," she whispered, her voice trembling, "Our children live."

---

Nilar allowed the small whisper that only he could hear lead him, drawing him through the labyrinthine mass that was Vader's castle. Men who had been chosen for their ability to be silent and swift crept behind him. They walked only in his footsteps, taking care of the hidden dangers all knew to be there.

They came to what seemed a dead end, with only gleaming silver metal around them, indistinguishable from what they had just passed. But the whisper continued in Nilar's mind, and he closed his eyes, pressing on the metal with his mind. It opened with a hiss, revealing at the end of a hallway two figures, one in the intimidating black hulk of Vader, the other a smaller, delicate female.

---

Anakin stood for a moment, the ripples of their love fading slowly into shock and then disbelief.

"What did you say?" he hissed softly, suddenly grateful for the mask that hid his expression. Children... alive? But hadn't she told him that they had died, victims of their father's wrath... unless she had lied to him, misleading him, like Obi-Wan, like the Jedi... His thoughts fell back into Vader's mindset, tracing along the grooves of bitterness and anger that were etched into his soul. Hurt rose in him, dark hurt mingled with anger that boiled in him, threatening to explode.

Before it could, however, before he could release the rage that pounded at him relentlessly, a driving force, a single shot blazed out from behind him, and even as he felt its approach, even as he turned, his anger forgotten, he was too late. The sudden rush of the Dark side taking hold of him had blinded him, betraying him. And he turned helplessly to see Padmé, his wife, his angel, his life, topple to the ground.



## Chapter 26

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**A/N**— Sorry that it took me so long to update. My school schedule is ridiculous, leaving me little time to write, and on top of that, I was having Writer's Block like no other. Thank you all for your patience with me, and enjoy the next angst-ridden update.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

Shock was the first thing that Anakin Skywalker felt. It rippled through him, devastating him, ripping his soul apart. It was akin to how it had felt when the cruelty of his master had been revealed ten years ago. *I am very sorry, Lord Vader. I'm afraid she died. It seems in your anger, you killed her.* This time was only more cruel, because he could see her on the ground, could see the blood trickling down her mouth, could see the light leaving her eyes.

Only this time it was not his power, not his that choked her and made her fall. This time, it was power that belonged to another. Pain ripped at Anakin, wordless, limitless agony, so much that he wanted to scream with it, to raise his hands and ask what he had done that she would be ripped away from him, even as his soul plunged deeper into darkness and he knew why, knew why she had been taken from him. The weight of his sins threatened to close in on him again, threatened to drown him in the rushing tide until he forgot everything that had happened, everything that he had accomplished. And even as his soul ripped itself to shreds, another emotion rose in him.

Anger. A darker, purer sense of hatred rose in him. He had thought that he had hated men in his lifetime; The Sand people, Obi-Wan, and then the Emperor; but this hate surpassed all rationalities, all bounds of reason. It rose in him, overwhelming everything, all his healing and renewing. It was the most intense thing he had ever felt, having such intensity that he almost trembled, shaking with the force of his world-shattering fury.

They had taken her from him, ripped her from his arms when he had promised to keep her safe. There would be no tears; everything he felt ran far too deep for that.

He charged the stunned Nilar and the rest of the group, embracing his grief and his fury and his anger all at once, allowing them to overcome him, not caring that he had fallen. He was a whirl of movement and dark, rejoicing in the deaths, relishing in them with a sense of righteous vengeance that only seemed to add to his grief, to double the pain upon itself.

He found it mildly ironic that the man who had killed his wife, this one who had dared to tempt Lord Vader's fury, was standing back, awe-struck by this display of power. Anakin advanced, wielding his power, using it, giving his soul to the dragon once more.

He shot Nilar back, using all the power he could. The man paused for a second, before he was slammed against one of the walls of Bast Castle, falling limply on the ground, an indent where his body had impacted the metal just moments earlier. Anakin advanced, knowing he was going to enjoy this...

And stopped, as something cried out to him, something called out from what seemed to be light-years away. It was a familiar call, one that he knew as well as he knew himself. He

paused, just for a moment, waiting and listening. What he felt was enough to make him pause, enough to make him regret all of what he had just done.

It was Padmé. Her presence called to him, even in its weakness illuminating him, casting off the shadow of Vader from him, making him feel shame and rapture all at once. Love filled him until he was brimming with it, overflowing with it. And he knew his unworthiness, and wept in his heart, tears of bitter hatred.

I love you, she whispered softly into his mind. I will never leave you, as you will never leave me, even in death, beloved.

And it gave him strength, gave him determination enough to allow the light to enter him and become part of him. It allowed him to rise up out of the mire of despair and look with new clarity and renewed vision. Hope colored by desperation came to him, and as he looked towards the cowering Imperial officer, he could feel only pity.

He came forward towards the man, suddenly aware of the breathing from the mask and how he could intimidate people. The darkness battled within him once more, and he crushed it.

"I will allow you to escape with your life," Anakin said softly. The man glared up at him, his eyes burning with revulsion. "I have long since passed the point when it is my decision who is to die and who is to live."

Nilar glared and then spat, anger and humiliation coursing through his body. He got up and ran from Anakin's sight, going to get more troops.

Anakin was already gone, caring no more for the anger that had overpowered him only minutes before. He cradled Padmé's head in his lap, stroking her hair back, comforting her, pleading with her, asking her forgiveness in the Force. I love you, he told her. You cannot leave me.

Her strength was waning such that she could not respond. The things he caught from her disoriented mind were only images; a boy and a girl, reaching out to touch them, love overcoming even the pain for just a few, breathtaking seconds...

"Love," he whispered aloud, tears catching in his throat, "Please..."

Her eyes focused for a few seconds, meeting his eyes even through the mask in a powerful blaze.

"Luke," she whispered brokenly. "Leia. Save them."

Through his trembling, he somehow managed to whisper to her, "I have to save you first."

And then her eyes glazed over, and although he could still feel her in the Force, he sensed her fading at such a rate that he could actually *feel* the life flowing out from her body, could actually sense her presence fading dangerously. It was then that he knew she would not survive, and then that he lost all hope.

Somehow, he managed to carry her all the way through the halls of Bast Castle to his starship. Somehow, he managed to numb the pain enough to cradle her in his arms, sheltering her. Every step was a burden for him; even to move seemed too much to ask, to manage to overcome the sense of inevitable grief and doom that hung over him.

When he came to the starship, he set her down gently on the medical table, his eyes burning once again with a kind of bitter determination. It was the same drive, the same possessive sense of love that had made him kill younglings that day, force himself to commit atrocities in the name of love... because he could not live without her.

The two droids waited in the background. 4-6C, the medical droid, waited patiently until his master was out of the room, then went in and started immediately to diagnose the problem. 9-HP simply waited outside, and then said in a mild tone of voice,

“If Lady Padmé dies, I believe Lord Vader will be quite perturbed with you.”

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Anakin sat down at the controls, his lips pursed, his focus absolute. He started to rise the craft, knowing that he would have to show exceptional piloting to avoid both being destroyed by the fleet that waited outside and also have to escape the imminent explosion of Bast Castle.

There was a sickening sense in his stomach of numbness that refused to leave; apathy descended on him, blocking him off from all emotion. He felt dazed, and could only see the world through a haze.

She was going to *die*, to leave him alone forever. There would be no second chances, that was certain; she would not come back to life again as she had before. She was going to *leave* him, and it would be worse because he had tasted what it could have been like, had felt the soft sweetness of her love, and the absence of it...

He knew he should have been panicking, should have been in the back corridor with Padmé, should have been weeping or screaming or something else that showed incredible emotion. Instead, there was nothing. There was a place inside of him where there should have been vast, sweeping pain as there had been before, but he found that it was numb, devoid of all thought and feeling.

He powered up the ship, his eyes burning with cold fire. The Imperial ships powered up and began to come after him, but he paid no attention to them. All of them would be dead and gone within the next couple of minutes. Instead, he focused intently on the time it would take them to get to empty space, where there would be nothing but blackness and stars.

The ship was being shot at now. A few of the blasts landed, managing to injure the vessel mildly. Anakin did not care, and still worked over the calculations, perfecting them with mechanical efficiency. Just as he was moving the ship away from the planet, preparing to jump away from the it, Bast Castle exploded.

The entirety of it was eerily silent before exploding in a fireball that arched into space, drawing all the ships in orbit towards it with a spectacle of gravity that pulled everything into the inferno that once had been Vader’s fortress.

He did not say anything, witnessing the deaths of the Imperial Stormtroopers with a face that seemed to be chiseled out of the same material as his mask, not even flinching when he felt their deaths through the Force. He only set the coordinates into his navigator and waited as he felt the slight acceleration of the ship pulling itself into space, cables groaning slightly with the effort.

Once the ship had stabled itself, he walked back to Padmé, the numbness beginning to unthaw as she reached across to him, straining with the effort.

He entered the room where the medical droid was looking over his wife, adding a few small patches of what looked like highly absorbent cloth to the wound, which was a gaping hole in her chest, bleeding through the thick fabric of her robe.

He leaned down and grabbed her hand, sorrow overcoming him as he bent his head. There were no more tears; this went far deeper than this, far too much to cure with simple weeping.

Padmé, he whispered to her softly in their connection, the most intimate thing they had ever shared, the merging of souls, emotions and thoughts, I lost you once. If I did again, it would destroy me.

No, she said softly into his heart. When I am gone— for it was a matter of when, not of if now, they both knew— You will go on, Love. She soothed him with her very presence, as she always had, as he had thought she always would. He only clung to her tighter, hanging onto her presence with everything that he could muster. She was slowly receding, the water of her life pouring out slowly.

Suddenly, a presence Anakin had not felt in twenty years, a presence that was distinctive and recognizable, a strong, individual presence, came to him.

“Qui-Gon?”

## Chapter 27

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### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Anakin sat, shocked beyond belief for a second, even to the point of forgetting what was happening. He had seen Qui-Gon's funeral, had seen the flames lick the Jedi Master's robe until his body was ablaze. And now, the same man stood before him, not in the flesh, but... different. He wanted to collapse into weeping laughter. He had finally gone insane, her death pushing him over the edge.

He looked back to his wife, seeing life ebb from her, knowing there was nothing he could do. The promise he made to his mother's grave years ago floated up in his memory, taunting him. He was letting her die, just as she had before, only this time they had *found* each other, this time he had overcome his demons, had triumphed. She couldn't die. An overpowering, pressing need fell into him. He would stop it; he had to. She was the only thing left preventing his fall into darkness, the only light in a world which seemed to blacken before his eyes. Without her, there was nothing.

The form of Qui-Gon knelt beside Anakin, looking just like he had twenty years ago. Tears ran freely down Anakin's cheeks; tears of pure grief. There was no anger or hatred; those would come later. There was only pain and despair now.

Anakin felt the Force moving around him once again; shifting. He turned, surprised, to stare out at the Jedi Master, who was gazing at Padmé, his eyes unwavering from her still form. He sighed and turned to Anakin, the first time he had spoke.

"She is alive."

Anakin clenched his teeth behind the mask, but said nothing. There was nothing he could say, not to an apparition, not while his *wife* was dying.

"There is still a way to save her," Qui-Gon continued.

Pain ripped across still-raw nerves, parts of Anakin he knew would never be healed. He turned to Qui-Gon, keeping his hold and his focus on the fading presence of Padmé.

"How?" his voice rasped out of the mask, made weak by grief. He refused to let the fires of hope brighten him.

Qui-Gon stood, and suddenly Anakin felt another presence in his mind, not invading him, but simply *there*. It was gentle, calming and strong, like the slow lap of waves against shore. It beckoned to him, calling him to go. And so he went, following the presence out of his own mind, traveling far away along to another place, somewhere that seemed infinitely familiar...

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Padmé was immersed in darkness. It felt suffocating, like she could not breathe. She was detached from all senses; blind, deaf and numb in the dark. There was simply her, nothing

else, not even the presence that had been with her before, helping her. She was alone, and in her loneliness, thoughts ran quickly through her mind, a constant stream.

The wound had been mortal. There was no doubt of that, and thus the numbness. Anakin, she thought with a degree of sadness. How would he possibly survive? How could he go on, after her death? A resolution developed in her heart. He *must* survive, *must* find a way to go on and find Luke and Leia, before the Emperor got to them.

Suddenly, there was an opening in the darkness. It was not a physical thing that she could see and reach out to with senses that she no longer possessed; it was more like something she felt, like the darkness removing itself, the pressure easing softly.

She saw in a haze her childhood home, where she had lived with her father and mother contently before even thinking of politics. It was astonishingly clear in her mind, and she began to regain her senses, smelling the sweetness of ripe fruit in the orchard behind her house. All thoughts of Anakin and her children were swept away as a new peace filled her heart, and she raised her head, noticing that only now did she have a head to *raise*.

The door to the small cottage opened, and she looked back with her inner-eye to see the darkness, and to know that it was time to leave it behind. With new-found serenity, she turned back to the home, noticing that there was a freshly-picked basket of flowers sitting on the table. Sunlight streamed in through the circular windows, and the soft chirpings of birds filled the air.

This would have been the perfect place for us to raise a family, she thought dazedly. There was no regret in her mind, only a fresh sense that the world was new, that she was stepping into a place of surprises, that it was time to leave everything else behind, that it was the past, and she began to forget...

Something called out to her, like a voice that was weakened through speaking through a window. It was almost an irritation to Padmé's hazy mind, like a gnat buzzing around her head. She ignored it and extended one leg to prepare to enter the field that was full of soft green grass that blew in the wind...

The voice, however, refused to stop calling, and she finally turned back to it, looking across the darkness. There was something there that had not been there before, a presence that she recognized as one she had known in another life...

She turned away from it with a frown, not knowing its name and not caring. She was about to go into the other world when she saw something blocking her path, a man with a wise, compassionate yet stern face, who gazed at her, arms crossed over his tan-robed chest.

She tilted her head up to meet his gaze squarely; drawing on strength she had accumulated in her other life, although she did not remember why.

"You must let me pass," she said mildly to the man, who raised an eyebrow. She felt almost as if she could pierce the fog in her mind to realize who he was, that she had known him before. "I must leave, and you are in my way, sir."

"Padmé," he said softly to her, and a whirl of emotions and thoughts rose at him saying the name. It possessed some strange relevance, as if it was the name of someone that she had known...

“Let me pass!” She shrieked at him, her voice made shrill by fear. He blocked her easily, grabbing securely onto her arms. When she realized that he would not let go, she stopped squirming in his grip and glared at him with growing anger.

“He needs you, Padmé.” She frowned, wanting to fight against the words, recognizing them as strange and dangerous. But he commanded her gaze, forcing her to accept and think about what he had said.

Who needs me? She wondered dazedly. What does he need *me* for? A slight glimmer of a memory, a twinkling of a thought rose before her eyes, and even as she wanted to fight it, to go against this thing that threatened to tear her from paradise, she found herself accepting it.

And then the glass was shattered. Her presence merged with that of the voice that she had felt, and in the stream of thoughts, she remembered herself, remembered what had happened. Above all, a sense of love rose up in her until she was weeping with it, weeping for the intense sense of desolation that had accompanied the love.

Qui-Gon had let her go sometime in the frenzy of thoughts and emotions she had exchanged. She bent over, unable to contain her tears. She could not leave him, not like *this*!

Qui-Gon knelt down to her level, raising her chin and staring into her eyes, wiping away her tears with one finger.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” he said quietly. “You can leave this behind, and choose *him*.”

She looked back to the field and orchard, the small cottage in which she should have raised her children. It was tempting for a moment, a paradise in which she could lose herself. But then she looked back to him, the one whom she called love, the one who she treasured above all others. And her choice was made.

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Anakin had felt her pull away from him, and had reached out to her with a sense of panic which was more than before, so much that his very soul cried with it, reaching out to her even through death. And then he had felt her come back to him, finally realizing who she was, and he had held his breath, not daring to hope.

The presence of Qui-Gon brought him out of the darkness and into a place where there was only light, wrapping around him and uplifting him. He felt Qui-Gon guiding the light through him, and there was a sense of great power that passed.

He did not know how long he was in the light, how long he was enveloped in its embrace. It felt like an eternity and yet only the span of two seconds. All he knew was when he slipped from it, coming gently sliding into awareness.

The first thing he felt upon awakening was a slight pressure on his hand, given by another. He opened his eyes to see the most beautiful thing he had ever known.

She lived. The word tasted odd on his tongue as he mouthed it to himself; *life*. They had somehow overcome even death, together. He looked down upon her sleeping form to see that the bloody hole in her chest had healed, that she was safe, that she was alive. Shock overwhelmed him, and this time, it was like waking to a new sunrise on Naboo, colors of

vivid garnet red and honeyed gold painted across the landscape of tall, silent emerald trees. Hope blossomed in him until he felt joy again, filling his heart completely until at last he was complete.

She stirred and then woke, her eyes slowly flickering to his. A small smile lit her face, a grin of triumph and awakening. There were no words needed between them; there never had been. She unified with him, caressing him slowly, comforting him, letting her know that she had felt his pain and fear and understood them, and that she would always be there. Even in death.

You are mine, Anakin Skywalker, she breathed. And he knew that she was his, that they belonged to each other, that their bond went further, deeper, that nothing could ever part them. Even through the darkness, even in the deepest throes of Vader, there had always been her light, shining through.

Padmé, he whispered, forgive me. She embraced him physically then, her arms coming to encircle his body clad in the black cape. He wept, and she made soothing noises to him, rocking him as if he was a child, comforting him. He pulled her into his arms until they were both standing together in the middle of a ship in deep space, rocking together.

They had overcome it, together. There was nothing that would ever pull them apart again.



## Chapter 28

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*A/N— Wow. Here I am at the last chapter of this. It hardly seems like I've written 103 pages, and that I've come so far. I really couldn't have done it without help, and so just thank all of you so much for your support of me. It meant so much to me to know that I had supporters all the way through this, and it was a crazy angst-filled ride with all of you. Thank you all so much, your feedback has been invaluable and has meant so much to me. Of course, this is not the end. I am in the middle of planning a sequel to this, named "Reparation." (Sounds exciting, doesn't it!) I'll probably start on it in anywhere from two weeks to two months, during which time I'll be doing a whole bunch of challenges and vignettes in order to increase my abilities and grow in strength as a writer. Once again, thank you all so much for everything!*

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Anakin stood at the bow of the ship, a large window that looked towards space and the eternity of stars contained in it. He had somehow always found the sheer vastness of it comforting rather than dwarfing, and it was a place where he could lose himself to find peace. Padmé was sleeping, exhausted by all that had happened, all that she had gone through. It was only him, and in the quiet, he could reflect.

Children. The implications of everything that word entailed suddenly broke over him. The Emperor had often spoken in hushed, veiled words to Anakin about the power that could have been contained in Skywalker's offspring, taunting him about Padmé. Had he known? Had Padmé been more willing to give her children up to torture and possible death rather than let their father know they even existed?

He felt a form come to be at his shoulder, and, before turning, knew it was Qui-Gon. Gratitude came to Anakin, gratefulness for all the Jedi Master had done.

"Thank you," he spoke aloud. The two words hardly seemed enough to convey the emotions that Anakin felt, the overwhelming rush of tears that had been held back, the lump in his throat when he thought about all he could have lost.

Qui-Gon merely smiled.

"You must forgive her." Anakin closed his eyes, suddenly feeling like a young Padawan being admonished by Obi-Wan.

"I've done enough that it should not be my forgiveness that she seeks."

There was silence then, a comfortable silence for Anakin to stare across the sky, reflecting. Qui-Gon was respectfully quiet, waiting for some hidden signal.

"You must go to Tatooine," the Jedi Master said at last. Anakin's first thought was one that illuminated him, giving both fear and hope all at once, a dizzying tilt of emotions. Obi-Wan, he thought, hesitating to speak aloud and give a name to both his fears and his hope. He sensed great wisdom in Qui-Gon as the older man's eyes twinkled, echoing the stars' light.

But neither of them said anything of Anakin's master, Qui-Gon's apprentice. Instead, Qui-Gon continued in a different vein, one that caught Anakin completely off-guard.

"You will find a healer named Sh'aya there." Qui-Gon impressed sudden knowledge on Anakin; routes and pathways and long, winding passageways. He knew without a doubt that it was the way to this Sh'aya Qui-Gon spoke of, and it took the space of a breath for him to realize what needed to be *healed*.

To be healed, to be out of the suit, to be able to breathe the free air and feel air across his face... to be able to be with Padmé for more than a few seconds, to feel her skin against his again... and, most of all, to leave the suit behind forever, to cast away the remnants of his own life. He would see his children eye to eye, face to face. It would truly be like being reborn. He felt the hope within him, and a brief, peaceful smile lit his face. Ahh, what it was to smile for Anakin! He had missed happiness as Vader, the happiness that now rose in him as he thought of the new future that was rising.

He turned to thank Qui-Gon, only to find that the Jedi Master was gone, having merged into the Force. But his presence was not really gone, and Anakin sensed with a vague feeling of joy that he only had to reach out again to feel the older man in the Force.

There was no more time for Anakin to muse, however. He felt another presence in the Force behind him, one that burned brightly again. He made no move to greet it, and did not drop his shields.

"You should be sleeping," he admonished lightly, still facing the window.

"Anakin..." She paused as if wanting to say something and not being able to find the words. She came up behind him, touching his arm lightly. Even this slight contact caused an indescribable vague pain to rise in Anakin, something he could not place. He shook her arm up, his lips compressed into a tight line. Despite his words to Qui-Gon, he somehow felt that she should have told him, that she should not have *lied* to him like she did.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He asked the question in the coldest voice he could muster. It was the hard, mechanical sound of a monster and the Right Hand of the Empire. It was the voice of a man who had terrorized the galaxy along with his own men. It was the cold, commanding tone of Vader. Padmé recoiled a whole step, her eyes narrowing in disbelieving anger.

When she spoke, her voice was equally as frigid.

"When would you have *liked* me to tell you? When the image of you slaughtering younglings was still fresh in my mind? When you almost tried to kill me?"

Anakin's shoulders slumped in defeat and his breath caught as everything she had said registered in his mind. All the guilt and the darkness that he had known as Vader came rushing back in a whirlwind that threatened to engulf him again, enshroud him in darkness. He could sense Padmé's horror and regret at what she had just said, but not even that mattered to him as he became lost in the tide.

Her voice contained tired pity but no apology.

"I am sorry, Anakin. You know I forgave you, and that was... slightly uncalled for." It was her Senator voice, her Senator face. Anakin's throat tightened. Had he really hurt her that bad,

that she had to fall back on the calm cool of diplomatic calm demeanor?

With great effort, he lowered his shields to her, exposing his thoughts and emotions. He felt her gentle response of lowering hers as well. They joined, and love swept over him, calming him and soothing him as it always had. She was the thing that dampened the flame within him and yet ignited it; they were two halves of a whole, and only together were they complete.

He was not surprised to find her in the shelter of his arm, leaning into his hold. Nor was he surprised to find his hand tightening around her shoulders in a simple caress. She was warm against his body; somehow, he had not realized how cold he had felt. A simple feeling of warm, tender devotion rose in him, a feeling that purged all remnants of despair.

There they stood, two walkers of skies watching the heavens shift around them. They did not know for how long they stood, for time did not matter to either. They were *beyond* time, beyond everything else. His black cloak streamed across her shoulders, wrapping her not in the darkness it represented, but instead in the strength of their love. She relaxed securely in him, giving and taking comfort and warmth. It seemed to them that this was all they would ever need; the Force and each other was enough.

But it was not really enough, and when Anakin spoke, it was with both concern and serenity.

“What did you name them?” No explanation was needed as to who *they* were. She shifted against his arm, nestling closer to him.

“Luke,” she breathed softly, Anakin repeated the name in his head; it was a good, strong name, one that was fitting for his son. “Leia,” she continued after a brief pause. Her voice trailed off as they shared an image between themselves, one that had been lost in the desperate rush before. *A baby girl, eyes a soft color of honey-brown, Padmé’s eyes... She opened them wide, darting her beautiful eyes around to take in every detail of the room, even in the very stages of simple first awakening. Strength fading... the effort to touch her in the Force, the need to somehow reach out and connect...*

The sweetness of the dream did not leave Anakin, and he could almost feel the individual presences in the Force of his son and daughter, each gleaming brightly like the undimmed stars that lay before him.

An idea came to him, one that made him smile with delight and anticipation, one that cast both nervousness and excitement in him. He caught a thought of his and allowed Padmé to see it, to feel it. She stepped back from him in puzzlement, not understanding.

“Reach out to them,” he urged her. “You felt their presences one, I *know* you can do it again.” He felt the same kind of excitement in her, but also a sort of bewildered puzzlement.

“How?” She smiled up at him, and he could feel both her willingness to learn as well as a small bit of shame at not knowing what to do already.

He took her hands, folding them into his own. Then he entered her presence, leading her into the light softly, with him as he had been before. Except this time, they did not stay, they did not stay as they had before. This time, he took her hand and whispered reverently, “Reach out.” Her vision-self closed her eyes, and he could feel her searching through the Force to

find them. He joined her hand to his, palm to palm, pulse for pulse, breath for breath. Power passed from him to her, and in one blazing, illuminating moment, the darkness was stripped away from his vision.

He felt them, two strong, individual presences that merged with he and Padmé, creating a new kind of unity, and he could feel their combined strength blazing across the stars, into infinity...

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It was a peaceful day in Alderaan, as it seemed to always be. There was the heat of the midday sun, which was somewhat muted in the courtyards that skirted across the Royal Palace. There was the soft clicking and humming of insects and birds outside in the beautiful forests that covered the lands, and sitting in the middle of all of this was Leia Organa.

Somehow, she was not paying attention to the natural wonders of the place. At the moment, actually, she was mildly bored. Her tutor, a stuffy, upright man, was taking a distinct sense of pride in lecturing her about proper behaviors at the Ball her parents were going to take her to; as it was her first dance, it was also the time when the people would be introduced to her, and so it was made very apparent that her mannerisms had to be every bit in place. She watched a pretty blue-green winged insect that was busy climbing over a rock and fanning itself at the same time, fascinated by this.

Suddenly, she felt change. It was not a change in the weather or in the steady drone of her teacher's voice, or in anything else that was immediately perceptible. It took her a few seconds to realize that the change came from within her, from deep inside a part of her, something was awakening that had lain dormant for almost ten years.

She lifted her eyes, recognizing something about the feeling, sensing that it was somehow familiar. When she realized what it was, when she identified the nagging feeling that she knew this somehow, she gasped quietly in shock and awe. It was the only memory she had of her mother, the only thing she had clung to since birth. *Warm, beautiful, kind, sad, a sudden union in thoughts...*

There was another presence as well. It was one that was secure and strong, one that felt like a rock. Leia did not know what it was or where it had come from, even though it too felt somewhat familiar. She allowed herself to sink further into the flow, not realizing where the power came from or how she was controlling it, not knowing how to speak in this new awareness.

The thin, proper voice of her teacher was the thing that brought her out of concentration.

"Leia? Are you paying attention to me?"

She turned, the feeling of togetherness, of completeness that felt strange yet right, had all vanished.

"Of course," she shrugged, attempting to rid herself of the lingering traces of the feeling. "Where were we?"

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The hot, lazy suns of Tatooine were making their slow, meandering journey across the sky. At the moment, they were at the highest point of the desert sky, seemingly paused, causing the whole desert to become almost unbearably hot. Luckily, there was no wind, for the wind would carry small grains of sand with it, biting tender human skin.

Luke Skywalker was busy. Despite being at a young age, he was busy helping out at the farm, doing whatever he could. Everyone worked, or everyone starved. Desert life was harsh and hard, leaving no mercy to those who waited around.

So it was that Luke was working out in the hot sun, gathering whatever plants he could find that grew out in the desert. He was not allowed to go beyond the parameters of the Farm; such a thing would be dangerous, and Luke was very careful to obey his Uncle Owen. Even now, he was in sight of his Uncle, being carefully watched over.

Something came to him, something he felt stirring deep inside of him, something infinitely strange and yet familiar. He dropped the plant he was holding and his eyes moved, slowly looking to the stars that lay beyond the planet he already hated. He could feel what felt like presences searching for something, for someone.

He then realized it was him, and with a touch of fear and a touch of excitement, he reached for the presences, finding them and joining them in what felt like an explosion of light, one that almost knocked him over in awe.

Images sped past him of a handsome man with longish hair and blue eyes that burned, burned with fervor and excitement. He saw a woman with long brown curls and pleasing features, and something stirred within him, calling out. He saw another person join the mental image he was creating, a girl who looked like the woman, whose brown eyes blazed with defiance and delight. He saw himself join that picture, and noticed with a sense of wonder that he looked like the man, that he could almost feel some invisible connection between these people from this vision.

“Luke,” he heard Owen’s voice say. He tried to pay no attention to the coarse sound of his uncle’s voice, but that was nearly impossible, and even as he clutched to the strings of the vision, trying to keep them from slipping away, they fell through his fingertips. He stared across the sky, as if by looking he could regain the vision again.

“*Luke*,” he heard Uncle’s voice say again, and this time, it was with a touch of impatience. Luke wrenched his vision from the sky, looking over to his uncle.

“Yes?” He asked, trying to keep irritation out of his voice. Owen frowned.

“This is no time to be daydreaming. We’ve got work to do.” Luke nodded, but not before there was a flash of defiance in his eyes that his uncle somehow managed to ignore.

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Anakin came back to the physical world of feeling and sound after what seemed like an eternity. He blinked quietly, remembering the presences he had felt. Pride in his son and in his daughter almost overwhelmed him, and he knew that Padmé felt the same, that she shared in his emotions. He took her hand and smiled, looking deep into her eyes, and he knew then that he was finally complete.

“They are beautiful, Love,” he whispered haltingly. “As beautiful as you.”

She embraced him then, reached forward and took him in her arms. He leaned his chin on her head even as it was she that was doing the comforting, she that was enveloping him, embracing him.

“This,” he said, softer yet, “is the happiest day of my life.”

As she smiled, practically radiating contentment, Anakin felt a sudden urge that was nearly overwhelming. He realized, in that moment, the extent of desire he had to be out of the suit. He wanted to run his fingers, living, *flesh* fingers, through her hair. He wanted to be able to kiss her like he had before, wanted to feel her lips warm and complying against his, wanted the pleasure of skin against skin... he wanted to be able to trace the line of her neck down to her collarbone to down even further, wanted...

She felt his desire and looked into his eyes, her eyes smoldering with intensity as she felt his desire, echoing it with her own. It was then that he remembered what Qui-Gon said, remembered the promise that lived within his heart.

“Love,” he whispered, “I have good news for you.” He shared with her then the image of Qui-Gon, what he had said about the journey to Tatooine. She let out a low cry of happiness and turned towards him, an illuminating smile on her face.

“Anakin,” she whispered, a single tear of happiness falling from her place, the only mark of what the past few days had cost her, and a sign of her relief. He took it in his hand, knowing that soon, he would be able to feel the tear with real, physical hands, and that soon, he would be with his children, united.

Anakin stared across the stars once more, quiet contemplation stirring in him. There was hope, he knew that for certain. Everything that had happened in the past few days; his pain and the return to the light, casting off the shadows and entering into new radiance, Padmé’s near death, discovering his children... it all boiled down to one thing, there was one single thing that had never faded at its core, something that never would.

The light was always stronger than the darkness. Always, there was one small glimmer even in the darkest night, when there seemed to be nothing else. When he had seen her die, over and over again in his mind, to the point where he killed for her, even then, there had been light. During the years when he had been engulfed in hate and despair, the most exquisite agony he could even begin to imagine, the light had been there. He had simply been too blind to see it.

The miracle of her love, the fact that she had actually *chosen* to forgive him, washed over him in a mighty flood, and this time, he allowed himself to drown in it, to become lost in it, submerged in a river of radiance and passion.

And newer and newer pathways of joy opened for him, extending, limitless through the Force. He felt his awareness expanding to encompass them all as they compounded one against another. Everything was just beginning, and despite the shadows of the Empire, there was still hope. There would always be hope, always be a ray shining. Hope filled him, shining brighter than all the stars, shining bright enough to make the darkness recoil in fear and disbelief. And as he shared a smile with Padmé, he knew that he had finally overcome it.

This was how it felt to be Anakin Skywalker... forever.